The New Criterion

March 2004

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: March 2004

A stupid party

The New Criterion has often had occasion to comment of the dominance of left-leaning ideology in American universities. In this space in October 2002, for example, we reported on "The Shame of America's One-Party Campuses," an article published in *American Enterprise* magazine which argued that

> Today's colleges and universities are *not*, to use the current buzzword, "diverse" places. Quite the opposite: they are virtual one-party states, ideological monopolies, badly unbalanced ecosystems. . . . They do not, when it comes to political and cultural ideas, look like America.

In support of this conclusion, the authors shared the results of a recent study that cross-referenced public voter-registration records with faculty rosters. Lo and behold, the overwhelming majority of professors were registered in a party of the Left (Democratic, Green, Working Families Party). At Brown University, for example, there were five professors of economics registered in a party of the Left, but only one in a party of the Right. In engineering, it was seven on the Left and two on the right. How's that for "diversity"?

As a matter of fact, at Brown, that's pretty good, because in English the ratio was ten on the Left and zero on the Right. Political science? Seven to zero. Sociology? Eight to zero. In history, seventeen to zero.

As we noted in 2002, Brown is well known as a left-leaning institution. But a similar pattern repeated itself across the board. At the State University of New York, for example, the study found fifteen faculty members in sociology were registered in a party of the Left and . . . zero in a party of the Right. In political science the ratio was twenty to one. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, it was thirty-seven to zero in English, twenty-eight to one in history, fourteen to zero in journalism, seventeen to two in political science, etc., etc. The pattern is the same at Harvard, at Davidson College, at Penn State University; it is the same at the University of California at Berkeley, at Syracuse University, at Pomona College, and the University of Maryland. Ditto for Stanford, UCLA, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. At Williams College, the study reported, out of a faculty of more than 200 only four were registered Republicans.

We suppose that few of our readers were surprised by this news. It merely confirmed the obvious, providing a bit of statistical corroboration for something that everyone already knew: that although "diversity" is the favorite mantra on campus today, strict political conformity is the reality.

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Of course, political complexion is not measured only by party affiliation. Indeed, the fact that faculties on most American campuses are predominantly Democratic is perhaps less significant than their adherence to what one writer called "Left Eclecticism," that intellectual goulash composed of varying bits of Marxism, feminism, racialism, deconstruction, post-colonialism, and other specimens of academic "theory."

The triumph of Left Eclecticism means that campus "diversity" involves not only political but also intellectual conformity. For although Left Eclecticism comes in many modes and levels of toxicity, it revolves around a common core of attitudes. One unalterable tenet is that "everything is political": that the traditional academic ideals of objectivity and disinterestedness are pernicious fictions and therefore that all academic pursuits can be, indeed must be, evaluated in political terms. This is why, for example, you so seldom see the word "truth" without scare quotes in academic writing these days. Truth is what the bourgeois hegemonists preach; any left-wing academic worth his salt rejects "truth" in favor of "'truth,'" its epistemologically challenged but politically adaptable cousin.

As for the practical implications of this approach to pedagogy, they were, we thought, vividly summed up by Keith Moxey, the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Art History at Barnard College and Columbia University. "The abandonment of an epistemological foundation for art history," Professor Moxey has written, means that "historical arguments will be evaluated according to how well they coincide with our political convictions and cultural attitudes." In other words, for Professor Moxey, as for so many of his academic brethren, things like truth, probability, and explanatory value take a distant back seat to politics. We hope that his students keep that in mind when they sit down to write their papers for him.

As we say, all of this is simply business as usual in contemporary academic life. It is a natural coefficient of the reign of political correctness among college faculties today. Still, one might ask, Why? Why are faculties overwhelming left-leaning? Why have so many abandoned the traditional scholarly ideals of objectivity and disinterested inquiry? Why have they embraced the rancid smorgasbord of Left Eclecticism? No doubt there are many factors that go into answering these questions. One answer, we believe, involves the institutionalization of the radicalism of the 1960s. After all, the race-class-gender brigade now ruling in the humanities and social sciences is patently a child of the political imperatives of that unlovely decade. But of course one could pose the question again: Why were faculties so susceptible to that brand of emancipationist rhetoric?

There are doubtless many reasons. Original sin is one explanation we have always favored, but we recognize that that is not the whole story. A novel reason has recently been proposed by Robert Brandon, chairman of the philosophy department at Duke University.

As most of our readers know, Duke has been a model of political correctness at least since the mid-1980s when the redoubtable Stanley Fish breezed into the English department there and began installing one of the latest, trendiest, left-most faculties anywhere in the country. Queer theory, post-colonial theory, gender studies, fifty-seven varieties of deconstructionist theory—Professor Fish embraced it all eagerly. And when the National Association of Scholars, a moderately conservative academic organization, attempted to start a chapter at Duke, Professor Fish demonstrated his allegiance to the contemporary spirit of academic diversity by writing to *The Chronicle*, a student newspaper, to charge that the NAS was "widely known to be racist, sexist, and homophobic." In case that didn't do the trick, he reportedly also

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wrote to Duke's Provost advising him not to appoint faculty belonging to the NAS to key committees involving tenure or curriculum decisions.

Last month, *The Chronicle* ran an advertisement placed by the Duke Conservative Union which called on Duke's president to address herself to the lack of political diversity among Duke's faculty. Duke in this respect looks a lot like most other universities: in its history department, for example, there were thirty-two registered Democrats, a few unaffiliated faculty and, yep, zero Republicans. Nothing unusual there: just the usual academic understanding of diversity in action. What was a bit unusual was Professor Brandon's explanation of the preponderance of left-leaning faculty at Duke. "We try to hire the best, smartest people available," Professor Brandon told *The Chronicle*.

> If, as John Stuart Mill said, stupid people are generally conservative, then there are lots of conservatives we will never hire. Mill's analysis may go some way towards explaining the power of the Republican party in our society and the relative scarcity of Republicans in academia. Players in the NBA tend to be taller than average. There is a good reason for this. Members of academia tend to be a bit smarter than average. There is a good reason for this too.

Oh dear. A few days after this story appeared, Professor Brandon wrote a letter to *The Chronicle* complaining that he had received numerous "venomous, hate filled e-mails from self-described 'conservatives.'" How shocking.

It is not often, we think, that academic arrogance makes quite so blatant a spectacle of itself. Everyone knows that professors as a group tend to think they are smarter and politically more virtuous than anyone outside the professorial flock, but generally they communicate this conviction indirectly, through snobbery and other forms of patronizing behavior. There is something almost touching about Professor Brandon's naked braggadocio. It is also nice that he manages to mangle John Stuart Mill and commit eighty-seven (some have detected ninety-four) logical mistakes in the space of his few sentences.

In our view, John Stuart Mill has a lot to answer for, but he never claimed that "stupid people are generally conservative." He would never have been so stupid. What he wrote, in a footnote discussing Disraeli in *Considerations on Representative Government*, was that the Conservative party in England was "the stupidest party." We trust that the chairman of the philosophy department at Duke University will appreciate the distinction.

In his letter complaining about the unpleasant response he had had to his comments, Professor Brandon announced that he would leave Mill out of his discussion. This was a wise decision. It might also be wise were he to take his own advice and "read more Mill." He might then avoid the atrocious logic of his opening sentence: "If, as John Stuart Mill said . . ." Exactly how, Professor, does it follow from what you say Mill said (only he didn't) that "then there are lots of conservatives we will never hire"? And how does Mill's "analysis," or whatever it is you think of as Mill's analysis—in fact, it is an unsupported contention thrown out for rhetorical effect—how does it explain "the power of the Republican party in our society"? How does it explain "the relative scarcity of Republicans in academia"? It doesn't. Of course, we know what you mean. You mean that you regard people who share your politics—which are the politics of 98 percent of the Duke faculty—as smarter than people who don't. But doesn't a professor of philosophy, albeit a professor of philosophy at Duke, have an elementary obligation to represent accurately a thinker he cites? And shouldn't he make some effort to reason coherently and not simply emote?

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William Chafe, dean of the faculty of Arts and Sciences at Duke, was quoted in *The Chronicle* defending the university's hiring and promotion procedures. But he added that "the key [to a healthy academic situation] is openness to intellectual discourse, embrace of free speech, and a belief that the quality of an argument is the key to its success." We couldn't agree more. So when is Dean Chafe going to start instituting those desirable qualities at Duke?

Prizes for everyone

Remember the Caucus Race in *Alice in Wonderland*? The creatures "began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over." "But who has won?" the contestants asked when everyone stopped moving. At last the Dodo said, "*Everybody* has won, and *all* must have prizes." We thought of the Dodo's approach to competition recently when reading about the decision of the Nashville, Tennessee school system to abolish its honor roll because it had become "an apparent source of embarrassment for some underachievers." As *The Washington Post* reported, "after a few parents complained that their children might be ridiculed for not making the list, lawyers [it's always the lawyers, isn't it?] for the Nashville school system warned that state privacy laws forbid releasing any academic information, good or bad, without permission."

Surely, we thought, this is to take a very parochial view of the matter. For if students might feel embarrassed about not making the honor roll, think of how embarrassed they would be if they were not the valedictorian, the winning quarterback, a national merit scholar, a prize-winning pianist, the homecoming queen, or one of the students accepted at Harvard. Think of how awful they would feel if it got out that they were not in every way as smart, as attractive, as talented, as successful as the lucky few who were, like Emma Woodhouse, "handsome, clever, and rich." An honor roll, as its name suggests, is meant to honor, to give public recognition, to those who excel. It is a last, pale inheritance of the spiritual patrimony we have inherited from the ancient Greeks who strove to be the best—and to be publicly recognized for their achievements. Nashville, like so many other communities, has decided to side instead with the Dodo.

Strong stomach dept.

Is there someone with a wicked sense of humor at Columbia University Press? We had to wonder when one of their new titles, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, crossed our desk. It is a work of homage, or hagiography, by the doyenne of French feminists, Hélène Cixous. It is a short book, but potent, perhaps the single most emetic exercise in academic sentimentality we have ever encountered. Consider this passage from the prefatory Author's Note:

> But how to paint or sketch such a genius at substitution? . . . One must, one can only catch him, portray him in flight, live, even as he slips away from us. In these sketches we shall catch glimpses of the book's young hero rushing past from East to West, . . . in appearance both familiar and mythical: here he is for a start sporting the cap of Jackie Derrida Koogan, as *Kid*, I translate: lamb-child, the sacrificed, the Jewish baby destined to the renowned Circumcision scene. They steal his foreskin for the wedding with God, in those days he was too young to sign, he could only bleed. This is the origin of the immense theme that runs through his work, behind the words signature, countersignature, breast [*sein*], *seing* (contract signed but not countersigned), *saint—cutting, stitching—indecisions . . . Let us continue.*

Let's not.

This is one of those books that should come with its own air-sickness bag.

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Lengthened shadows: VII

Religion in America: ancient & modern

by David B. Hart

All culture arises out of religion. When religious faith decays, culture must decline, though often seeming to flourish for a space after the religion which has nourished it has sunk into disbelief . . . no cultured person should remain indifferent to erosion of apprehension of the transcendent.
—Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*

The herdsman who comes to Pentheus from Mount Cithaeron, in *The Bacchae*, tells how the Theban women possessed by Dionysus take up serpents without being bitten and fire without being burned. It is not unlikely, given how common such phenomena are in "enthusiast" and "ecstatic" religion, that here and elsewhere Euripides grants us some glimpse of the actual Dionysiac orgy, even long after its migration into Greece from Thrace, when the cult had been assumed into the soberer mysteries of the Olympians.

And other features of the rite, reported in various sources, follow the familiar enthusiast pattern. At the height of their devotions, the maenads were seized by violent raptures, to which they surrendered entirely; absorbed in the formless beauty of the god, and tormented by fitful intimations of his presence, they worshipped him with cries of longing and delight, desperate invocations, wild dithyrambs, delirious dance, inebriation, and the throbbing din of corybantic music; abandoning all sense of themselves, they suffered visions and uttered prophecies, fell ravished and writhing to the earth, or sank into insensibility. In short, it was all very—in a word—American.

At least, that is what I have been disposed to think ever since an epiphany visited itself upon me nearly twenty years ago, as I stood amid the pestilential squalor of an English railway station, awaiting my train, and deliberating on whether I should risk the ordeal of a British Rail sandwich.

Generally one might prefer grander settings for one's moments of illumination—Wordsworth's lakes, Amiel's azure peaks—but it was, in this instance, the very dreariness of my surroundings that occasioned my awakening. The station's oblong pillars were blackly begrimed; shreds of posters in garish hues hung limply from the walls; in shallow depressions of the concrete floor opaque pools of oleaginous water glistened with a sinister opalescence; an astringent chemical odor of antiseptics vying with various organic purulences suffused the damp air; a scattering of gaunt torsos farther along the platform bore eloquent witness to the malaise of Britain's post-war gene pool; and nothing was out of the ordinary. But, all at once, two thoughts occurred to me simultaneously, and their wholly fortuitous conjunction amounted to a revelation. One was something like "Boredom is the death of civilization"; and the other something like "America has never been this modern."

Not that this place was conspicuously

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worse than—or even as wretched as—countless stops along the way in the United States, but anyone who has lived in Britain for some time should understand how such a place might, in a moment of calm clarity, seem like the gray glacial heart of a gray and glaciated universe. Somehow this place was adequate to its age—to that pervasive social atmosphere of resignation at which modern Britain is all but unsurpassed; it was disenchantment made palpable, the material manifestation of a national soul unstirred by extravagant expectations or exorbitant hopes. Admittedly, contemporary England's epic drabness makes everything seem worse; in the Mediterranean sun, culture's decay can be intoxicatingly charming (and Catholic decadence is so much richer than Protestant decadence).

But really, anywhere throughout the autumnal world of old and dying Christendom, there are instants (however fleeting) when one cannot help but feel (however imprecisely) that something vital has perished, a cultural confidence or a spiritual aspiration, and it is obviously something inseparable from the faith that shaped and animated European civilization for nearly two millennia. Hence the almost prophetic "fittingness" of that rail station: once religious imagination and yearning have departed from a culture, the lowest, grimmest, most tedious level of material existence becomes not just one of reality's unpleasant aspects, but in some sense the limit that marks out the "truth" of things.

This is an inexcusably impressionistic way of thinking, I know, but it seems to me at least to suggest a larger cause for the remarkable willful infertility of the native European peoples: not simply general affluence, high taxes, sybaritism, working women, or historical exhaustion, but a vast metaphysical boredom. This is not to say that the American birthrate overall is particularly robust, hovering as it is just at or below "replacement level," but it has not sunk to the European continental average of only 1.4 children per woman (so reports the UN), let alone to that of such extreme individual cases as Spain (1.07), Germany (1.3), or Italy (1.2). Britain, at almost 1.7 children per woman, is positively philoprogenitive by European standards. And the most important reason for the greater—though not spectacular—fecundity of the United States appears to be the relatively high rate of birth among its most religious families (the godless being also usually the most likely to be childless).

It is fairly obvious that there is some direct, indissoluble bond between faith and the will to a future, or between the desire for a future and the imagination of eternity. And I think this is why post-Christian Europe seems to lack not only the moral and imaginative resources for sustaining its civilization, but even any good reason for continuing to reproduce. There are of course those few idealists who harbor some kind of unnatural attachment to that misbegotten abomination, the European Union—that grand project for forging an identity for post-Christian civilization out of the meager provisions of heroic humanism or liberal utopianism or ethical sincerity—but, apart from a bureaucratic superstate, providently and tenderly totalitarian, one cannot say what there is to expect from that quarter: certainly nothing on the order of some great cultural renewal that might inspire a new zeal for having children.

Unless one grants credence to the small but fashionable set that has of late been predicting a reviviscence of Christianity in Europe (in gay defiance of all tangible evidence), it seems certain that Europe will continue to sink into its demographic twilight and increasingly to look like the land of the "last men" that Nietzsche prophesied would follow the "death of God": a realm of sanctimony, petty sensualisms, pettier rationalisms, and a vaguely euthanasiac addiction to comfort. For, stated simply, against the withering boredom that descends upon a culture no longer invaded by visions of eternal order, no civilization can endure.

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As I say, however, this absolute degree of modernity has never quite reached America's shores. Obviously, in any number of ways, America is late modernity's avant-garde; in popular culture, especially, so prolific are we in forms of brutal vapidity and intellectual poverty that less enterprising savages can only marvel in impotent envy. Nevertheless, here alone among Western nations the total victory of the modern is not indubitable; there are whole regions of the country—geographical and social—where the sea of faith's melancholy, long, withdrawing roar is scarcely audible. There is in America something that, while not "Christendom," is not simply "post-Christian" either; it is (for want of a better term) a "new antiquity." In many ways, one might go so far as to say, the great difference between Europeans and Americans is that the former are moderns and the latter ancients (if sometimes of a still rather barbarous sort); and the reasons for this are religious.

Though really it would be truer to say that, as Americans, we know the extremes of both antiquity and modernity; what we have never yet possessed is the middle term—a native civilization, with religion as a staid and stable institution uniformly supporting the integrity of the greater culture—that might have allowed for a transition from the one to the other. Thus it is the tension between the two that makes America exceptional, and that lends a certain credibility both to those who contemn her for being so menacingly religious and to those who despise her for being so aggressively godless. In part because the United States broke from the old world at a fateful moment in history, in part because its immense geography preserves the restive peculiarities of various regions and social classes relatively inviolate and so allows even the most exotic expressions of religious devotion to survive and flourish, it has never lost the impress of much of the seventeenth-century Protestantism—evangelistic, ecclesially deracinated, congregationalist, separatist—that provided it with its initial spiritual impulse. Hence Christendom could never die from within for us, as it has for the rest of the West; we fled from it long ago into an apocalyptic future and so never quite suffered Europe's total descent into the penury of the present.

Instead, the United States, to the consternation of bien pensants here and abroad, is saturated in religion as no other developed nation is. Not only do 40 percent of its citizens claim to attend worship weekly, and 60 percent at least monthly (though those numbers have been disputed), but apparently—staggeringly—fewer than 5 percent are willing to call themselves atheists or even agnostics. And an extraordinary number of the devout (at least in certain classes) are not merely pious, but God-haunted, apocalyptic, chiliastic, vulgarly religiose, and always living in the end times.

Against the withering boredom that descends upon a culture no longer invaded by visions of eternal order, no civilization can endure.

Moreover, for most of us (even if we refuse to admit it), America itself is a kind of evangelical faith, a transcendent truth beyond the reach of historical contingency. Even our native secularism tends towards the fanatical. We remain believers. To some, of course, this American religiousness is simply an exasperatingly persistent residue of something obsolete, an alloy of which modernity has not yet entirely purged itself, and perhaps history will prove them right. But it is likely that such persons do not quite grasp the scale, potency, or creativity of the "ancient" aspect of America and have little sense of its deepest wellsprings. Which brings me back to the maenads of Dionysus.

In his account of Appalachian snake handling, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (1995), Dennis Covington tells of worshippers taking up serpents without being bitten and fire without being burned; of a woman,

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seized by raptures, emitting ecstatic cries of pain and pleasure, which Covington himself involuntarily accompanies with a tambourine; of the "anointed" losing themselves in what could only be called an erotic torment; of wild clamors of glossolalia, fervent invocation, and the throbbing din of Pentecostalist music; of the faithful suffering visions and uttering prophecies; even of his own experience of handling a snake, and of his sense of world and self, in that moment, disappearing into an abyss of light. Nor is it unusual in many "Holiness" congregations for worshippers to fall to the ground writhing and "rolling" or—"slain in the Spirit"—to lapse into insensibility.

Not that such forms of devotion are unknown in other parts of the developed world, but only here have they been so profuse, spontaneous, and genuinely indigenous. One might, for instance, adduce the 1801 week-long revival at Cane Ridge, whose orgiastic rites were celebrated by as many as twenty-five thousand worshippers, or the 1906 "new outpouring" of the scriptural "gifts" or "charisms" of the Holy Spirit—prophecy, speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, the casting out of demons, and so forth—upon the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, which gave birth to the "Pentecostalist" or "charismatic" spirituality that has spread throughout the global South more rapidly than any other form of Christianity in the modern world. Examples are abundant.

And this is why I say Americans are "ancients:" not simply because, throughout the breadth of their continental empire, as in the world of late antiquity, there exists a vague civic piety ramifying into a vast diversity of religious expressions, even of the most mysterious and disturbing kind; but because here there are those to whom the god—or rather God or his angel—still appears. That sort of religion is immune to disillusion, as it has never coalesced into an "illusion"; it moves at the level of vision. In a country where such things are possible, and even somewhat ordinary, the future cannot be predicted with any certitude.

One must at least say of the old Christendom that, if indeed it has died, it has nonetheless left behind plentiful and glorious evidence of its vanished majesty: its millennial growths of etherealized granite and filigreed marble, its exquisitely wrought silver, its vaults of gold: in all the arts miracles of immensity and delicacy. And the very desuetude of these remnants imbues them with a special charm. Just as the exuviae of cicadas acquire their milky translucence and poignant fragility only in being evacuated of anything living, so the misty, haunting glamour of the churches of France might be invisible but for the desolation in their pews. Similarly, countless traces of the old social accommodations—laws, institutions, customs, traditions of education, public calendars, moral prejudices, in short all those complex "mediating structures" by which the old religion united, permeated, shaped, and preserved a Christian civilization—linger on, ruined, barren, but very lovely.

There is nothing in the least majestic, poignant, or "exuvial" about American religion, and not only because it possessed very little by way of mediating structures to begin with. If the vestigial Christianity of the old world presents one with the pathetic spectacle of shape without energy, the quite robust Christianity of the new world often presents one with the disturbing spectacle of energy without shape. It is not particularly original to observe that, in the dissolution of Christendom, Europe retained the body while America inherited the spirit, but one sometimes wonders whether for "spirit" it would not be better to say "poltergeist." It is true that the majority of observant Christians and Jews in the United States are fairly conventional in their practices and observances, and the "mainstream" denominations are nothing if not reserved. But, at its most unrestrained and disembodied, the American religious imagination drifts with astonishing ease towards the fantastical and mantic, the messianic and hermetic. We are occasionally given shocking reminders of this—when a communitarian separatist sect in Guyana or a cult of

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comet-gazing castrati commits mass suicide, or when an encampment of deviant Adventists is incinerated by an inept Attorney General—but these are merely acute manifestations of a chronic condition. The special genius of American religion (if that is what it is) is an inchoate, irrepressibly fissiparous force, a peregrine spirit of beginnings and endings (always re-founding the church and preparing for Armageddon), without any middle in which to come to rest.

In part, this is explicable simply in light of colonial history. The founding myth of the English settlements, after all, was in large part that of an evangelical adventure (as can be confirmed from the first Charter of Virginia, or the Mayflower Compact, or the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut), marked indelibly by covenantal Puritanism.

It seems certain that Europe will continue to sink into its demographic twilight and increasingly to look like the land of the "last men" that Nietzsche prophesied would follow the "death of God": a realm of sanctimony, petty sensualisms, pettier rationalisms, and a vaguely euthanasiac addiction to comfort.

Even the Anglican establishments in the Deep South, Virginia, and Maryland (a criminal imposition, in this last case, upon an aboriginal Catholicism) were deeply influenced by Puritan piety, as were perhaps even the Presbyterian churches. Quakerism, principally in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, infused a mystical noncomformism into the colonies, while later immigrations of German Anabaptists—Mennonites, the Amish, Hutterites—imported a "free church" discipline of somewhat more rigorist variety, and perhaps something of radical Anabaptism's apocalyptic utopianism (it would be difficult, at any rate, to be unimpressed by the similarities between the tragic history of the 1535 "Kingdom of Münster" and that of the compound at Waco). In time even small Pietist communities added their distinctive colorations. And so on.

Though the churches of the magisterial reformation, the Church of England, and Catholicism found America fertile soil (as every religion does), the atmosphere in which they flourished was one permeated by a religious consciousness little bound to tradition, creed, hierarchy, or historical memory, but certain of its spiritual liberty and special election.

Which is why one could argue that American religion found its first genuinely native expression during the great age of revivalism. The two Great Awakenings, early and late in the eighteenth century, the spread of evangelical Christianity throughout the southern states, the sporadic but powerful western revivals—all of these contributed to the larger synthesis by which contemporary American religion was fashioned. And from the revivalist impulse followed not only the broad main currents of American evangelical Protestantism, but also innumerable more heterodox and inventive forms of Christianity: millenarian sects like the Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses, spiritual or enthusiast movements like Pentecostalism, perhaps even (in a way) "transcendentalist" schools like the quasi-Swedenborgian Christian Scientists. Nor, indeed, are the differences in sensibility as great as one might imagine between all of mainstream evangelicalism and its more outlandish offshoots (one need only consider the huge success of the ghastly *Left Behind* novels to realize that an appetite for luridly absurd chiliastic fantasies is by no means confined to marginal sects).

Certainly it is only in regard to this revivalist milieu that one might legitimately

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speak of "*the* American religion," as Harold Bloom did in his 1992 book of that title. Bloom, it should be noted, was scarcely the first to call it a "gnostic" religion, nor is his treatment of the matter exemplary in analytic precision, but he must be given credit for having grasped how deeply constitutive of America's normal religious temper the gnostic impulse is. If the pathos of ancient Gnosticism lay in a sense of cosmic alienation—in an intuition of the self's exile in a strange world, called in its loneliness to an identity and a salvation experienced only within the self's inmost core, and that by the agencies of a special spiritual election and knowledge that elevate the self above the ignorance of the derelict—then it is a pathos readily discernible in any number of distinctively American religious movements and moments. One finds it at its most speculatively refined and eloquent in Emerson and in the transcendentalism to which he gave voice; at its most risible and grotesque in Scientology and similar "schools." As Bloom notes, nothing more perfectly fits the classic pattern of gnostic religion—fabulous mythologies, jealously guarded cryptadia, a collapse of the distinction between the divine and the human—than Mormonism. But it requires somewhat greater perspicacity to recognize this same pathos at work under more conventional guises.

Most of us, for instance, rarely have cause to reflect that some of the variants of America's indigenous evangelical Christianity, especially of the "fundamentalist" sort, would have to be reckoned—if judged in the full light of Christian history—positively bizarre. Yet many of its dominant and most reputable churches have—quite naturally and without any apparent attempt at novelty—evolved a Christianity so peculiar as to be practically without precedent: an entire theological and spiritual world, internally consistent, deeply satisfying to many, and nearly impossible to ground in the scriptural texts its inhabitants incessantly invoke. And Bloom deserves some (reluctant) praise for having seen this and having seen why it should be: the American myth of salvation, at its purest, is a myth of genuinely personal redemption, the escape of the soul from everything that might confine and repress it—sin, the world, and the devil, but also authority, tradition, and community—into an eternal, immediate, and indefectible relation with God, and it is to this myth, much more than the teachings of the New Testament, that some forms of American evangelical Christianity, especially fundamentalism, adhere.

This is obvious if one merely considers the central (and some might say only) spiritual event of fundamentalist faith and practice, that of being "born again." In the third chapter of John's Gospel, where this phrase is originally found, its context is mystagogical and clearly refers to baptism, but so far removed has it become from its original significance in many evangelical circles that it is now taken to mean a purely private conversion experience, occurring in that one unrepeatable authentic instant in which one accepts Jesus as one's "personal" lord and savior. Some fundamentalists even profess a doctrine of "perpetual security," which says that this conversion experience, if genuine (and therefrom hangs, for some, an agonizing uncertainty), is irreversible; like the initiation ceremonies of the ancient mystery cults, it is a magic threshold, across which—once it has been passed—one can never again retreat, no matter how wicked one may become. One could scarcely conceive of a more "gnostic" concept of redemption: liberation through private illumination, a spiritual security won only in the deepest soundings of the soul, a moment of awakening that lifts the soul above the darkness of this world into a realm of spiritual liberty beyond even the reach of the moral law, and an immediate intimacy with the divine whose medium is one of purest subjectivity.

This, at any rate, is one very plausible way of approaching the matter of religion in America: to consider it primarily in its most distinctive of autochthonous forms, as a

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new gnostic adventure allied to a new eschatological mythology, which has transformed the original Puritan impulse of the upper English colonies into something like a genuinely new version of Christianity, a Christianity whose moderate expressions are, in the long historical view, amiably aberrant, but whose extreme expressions are frequently apocalyptic, enthusiast, and even—again—Dionysiac. One could argue, though, that it is an approach that, while not exactly unjust, is a mite perverse. After all, the exceptional nature of American piety consists not only in the opulence and prodigality of its innovations and deviations, but also in the extraordinary tenacity (as compared, at least, to the situation in other developed nations) with which the more established and traditional communities hold on to their own, generation after generation, and in some cases attract new converts: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism, Presbyterianism, Eastern Orthodoxy, not to mention the various kinds of synagogical Judaism.

And surely one should note that—however widespread and dynamic the (by no means uniform) phenomenon of evangelical Christianity may be—the Roman Catholic Church constitutes the single largest denomination in the United States and is growing at an impressive pace (in large part, obviously, because of Hispanic immigration). If fifty years hence, as demographic trends adumbrate, there are approximately 400 million Americans, fully a quarter may be Hispanic. Of these, one must immediately note, as many as a third may be evangelicals, but it seems clear that Catholicism will continue to increase not only in absolute numbers, but also relative to other Christian denominations. And, despite Harold Bloom's quaint asseveration that "most" American Catholics are gnostics (rather than, as is true, "very many"), this might perhaps mean that the more extreme species of revivalist individualism may actually relinquish some slight measure of its dominance of the American religious consciousness.

And, then again, perhaps not. The institutional reality of American Christianity has always been too diverse for simple characterizations, but at present this much is certain: the churches most likely to prosper greatly are those that make an appeal to—and an attempt to adopt the style of—an emotive individualism. Whether this means seeking to provide a sort of chaplaincy for small communities of earnest, socially conscientious liberals (as do many mainstream Protestant parishes and many Catholic parishes that might as well be mainstream Protestant), or promoting a more traditional—if largely undemanding—popular moralism, or promising more extreme forms of spiritual experience, or supplying a sort of light spiritual therapy, what is ultimately important is that institutional authority and creedal tradition not interpose themselves between the believer and his God. And as a general, moderate, and respectable Christian piety has gradually lost its hold on the center of American society, this spiritual individualism has become more pronounced.

In popular culture, especially, so prolific are we in forms of brutal vapidity and intellectual poverty that less enterprising savages can only marvel in impotent envy.

Nothing is more suggestive of the immense institutional transformations that may lie ahead for American Christianity than the growth of the so-called "megachurches," enormous urban "parishes" built more or less on the model of suburban shopping malls, accommodating sometimes more than 20,000 congregants, and often featuring such amenities as bookstores, weight rooms, food courts, playing fields, coffee houses, even hostelries and credit unions. Worship in such churches often takes the form of mass entertainments—

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popular music, video spectaculars, sermons of a distinctly theatrical nature—and constitutes only one among a host of available services. Obviously, the scale of such enterprises is possible only because the spiritual life to which they give refuge is essentially private: each worshipper alone amid a crowd of other worshippers, finding Christ in the emotional release that only so generously shared a solitude permits. When Christ is one's personal savior, sacramental mediation is unnecessary and pastoral authority nugatory; convenience, however, and social support remain vital.

I do not mean to ridicule these churches, incidentally: I am not competent to say whether they represent merely a final disintegration of American Christianity into an absurd variety of consumerism, or whether they might be taken as—within the constraints of contemporary culture—a kind of new medievalism, an attempt to gather small cities into the precincts of the church and to retreat into them from a world increasingly inimical to spiritual longing. For me they do, however, occasion three reflections: first, that no other developed nation could produce such churches, because no other developed nation suffers from so unrelenting a hunger for God; second, that the social medium, the "middle," that I have claimed American religion has always largely lacked is perhaps more profoundly absent now than it has ever been, so much so that many Christians find themselves forced to create alternative societies to shelter their faith; and, third, that evangelical individualism may in fact be becoming even more thoroughly the standard form of American Christianity.

Prognostication is of course always perilous, especially when one is considering a matter as thronged with imponderables as America's religious future. My tendency, though, is to assume that for some years to come America will continue to be abnormally devout for an industrialized society; in fact I suspect (for reasons that will presently become clear) that it might even become a great deal more devout. But there is also that "other America" that could scarcely be more energetically post-Christian, and it requires only a generation or two for a society to go from being generally pious to being all but ubiquitously infidel; in the age of mass communication and inescapable "information," when an idea or habit of thought or fashionable depravity does not have to crawl from pen to pen or printing press to printing press, these cultural metabolisms occur far more quickly than they used to do. The ease with which an ever more flamboyant and temerarious sexual antinomianism has migrated through the general culture is instructive, at the very least, of how pliant even the most redoubtable of moral prejudices can prove before the blandishments of modern ideas when those ideas are conveyed, principally, by television.

There is no reason to be confident that the rising and succeeding generations of Catholics and evangelicals, Hispanic or "Anglo," will not progressively yield to the attractions (whatever they are) of secularist modernity. Some estimates of the decline in church attendance over just the past dozen years put it as high as 20 percent (though neither the accuracy nor the meaning of that number is certain). And the young of college age profess markedly less faith than their elders, say some surveys (though this, if true, may be little more than callow defiance of parents or the affectation of intellectual and moral autonomy). The American habit of faith will probably run many of the new unbelievers to earth, of course, but the great age of disenchantment may yet dawn here as it has in other technologically and economically advanced societies.

What, however, I suspect will be the case is that—however playfully or balefully heathen the circumambient culture may continue to become—religion in America will remain at least as vigorous as it is now for at least a few decades. The two most influential and vital forms of Christianity, almost certainly, will be evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism (between

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which even now, however irreconcilable their ecclesiological principles, one can observe certain areas of intellectual and cultural rapprochement taking shape). Pentecostalism, moreover, is growing everywhere in the Christian world, and it is reasonable to suppose that more "charismatic" forms of both Catholicism and Protestantism will increasingly flourish here as well.

Around these two massive realities, smaller Protestant denominations of a markedly conservative complexion may remain relatively stable, I would imagine, so long as they remain conservative. Eastern Orthodoxy—along with the other ancient Eastern Churches, the most intransigently immune of Christian communities to the lure of change—has enjoyed something of a golden age of conversions over the past three decades, especially from Protestant denominations. Though it has long been seen as a predominantly "ethnic preserve" for Greeks, Russians, Serbs, Arabs, etc., Orthodoxy will probably continue to grow from outside its "natural" constituency, and may in a few generations come to be dominated in this country by communicants with no ethnic ties to the tradition.

Faiths other than Christianity will in all likelihood, even as their total numbers increase, decline in their percentage of the population (with the possible exception of Mormonism). The cultural and even religious influence of Judaism on America society will persist, one assumes, but in this regard it will be practically unique. Certainly nothing like the constant and volatile growth of Islam in Europe is likely here in the near term; despite occasional claims to the contrary, there are probably fewer than two million American Muslims; the majority of American Arabs are Christian, and our immigrants come principally from cultures where Islam is a small presence at best.

Where, among Christian congregations, it seems obvious to me that there will be no conspicuous growth, and indeed a great deal of diminution, is among the more liberal of the mainstream Protestant denominations. As much attention as is given in the press to the "lively" debates underway in many of the Protestant churches over such things as sexual morality, or to the New Hampshire Episcopal church's elevation of the adulterous and actively homosexual Gene Robinson to its episcopacy, these remain matters of concern to communities so minuscule by comparison to the larger religious realities of American culture, and so clearly destined for further fragmentation and tabescence, that it is inconceivable that they could be very relevant to the future shape of American religion.

When one considers the most liberal forms of mainstream American Protestantism, it is not even obvious that one is any longer dealing with religion at all, except in a formal sense. Certainly they exhibit very few recognizable features of a living faith.

Things like the Gene Robinson affair may, of course, be genuinely instructive regarding certain shifts in the larger society, especially in certain regions of the country. But, when one considers the most liberal forms of mainstream American Protestantism, it is not even obvious that one is any longer dealing with religion at all, except in a formal sense. Certainly they exhibit very few recognizable features of a living faith (such as a reluctance to make up their beliefs as they go along), and it is difficult to see many of their "bolder" gestures of accommodation as amounting to anything more than judicious preparations for a final obsolescence. The future of American religion in the main, whatever it is, lies almost certainly elsewhere.

In saying this, I am not, I hasten to add, attempting to be either cavalier or contemptuous. My judgments are prompted

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simply by two immense sets of statistical fact: those concerning birthrates and those concerning immigration. As for the former, I merely observe that theologically and morally conservative believers tend to have more children. Conservative American Christians reproduce at a far greater rate than their liberal brethren and at an enormously higher rate than secularized America; the extraordinary growth of traditionalist Christian communities in recent decades is something that has been accomplished not only by indefatigable evangelization, but by the ancient and infallible methods of lawful conjugation and due fruition.

More importantly, though, the form that American religion will take in coming years is increasingly dictated by the demographic influx from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In his indispensable book *The Next Christendom* (2002), Philip Jenkins remarks that the effect of mass immigration from the global South and Pacific East to the United States in recent years has been, in fact, to make America a more Christian nation. And the Christianity that is being imported from these parts of the world is, to a great extent, very conservative in its most basic moral precepts and metaphysical presuppositions. And, throughout the developing world, the Christianity that is growing most exuberantly (with, as Jenkins demonstrates, a rapidity that beggars the imagination) is in many cases marked by the New Testament charisms: prophecy, exorcisms, glossolalia, visions, miraculous healings. These are not things, one must make clear, confined only to small, sectarian communities. A Ugandan Catholic priest of my acquaintance has claimed to me—with obviously some hyperbole—that all African Christianity is charismatic to one degree or another. And the effect of Pentecostalism's success on the worship of Catholic congregations in places like the Philippines and Brazil is well documented.

All of which tends to make rather hilarious a figure like John Spong, the quondam Episcopal bishop of Newark. It was Spong who, in 1998, produced an hysterical screed of a book, pompously entitled *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, that—in arguing for a "new Christianity," unburdened by such cumbrous appurtenances as, for instance, God—succeeded only in making audible the protracted death rattle of a moribund church. It was Spong also who, that same year, appalled that African bishops at the Lambeth Conference had defeated movements towards an official Anglican approbation of homosexuality, delivered himself of a fiercely petulant diatribe almost touching in its unreflective racism; these Africans, he declared (all of whom were far better scholars and linguists than he, as it happens), had only recently slouched their way out of animism, and so were susceptible to "religious extremism" and "very superstitious" forms of Christianity.

Now, admittedly, Spong is a notorious simpleton, whose special combination of emotional instability and intellectual fatuity leaves him in a condition rather like chronic *delirium tremens*; so it is not surprising that, on being somewhat unceremoniously roused from the parochial midden on which he had been contentedly reclining, his reaction should be puerile and vicious; but his perplexity and rage were genuine and understandable. Many within the languishing denominations of the affluent North, until they are similarly shaken from the slumber of their ignorance, are simply unprepared for the truth that, in the century ahead, Christianity will not only expand mightily, but will also increasingly be dominated by believers whose understanding of engagement with the non-Christian or post-Christian world is likely to be one not of accommodation, compromise, or even necessarily coexistence, but of spiritual warfare. This is, in many ways, an "ancient" Christianity. As immigration from the developing world continues, it will almost certainly find itself most at home in "ancient" America. (But this suggests that my earlier approach to my topic was better after all.)

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The irony that attaches to these reflections is that many of the forms of Christianity entering America from the developing world are in a sense merely coming home.

In the century ahead, Christianity will not only expand mightily, but will increasingly be dominated by believers whose understanding of engagement with the non-Christian or post-Christian world is likely to be one not of accommodation, compromise, or even necessarily coexistence, but of spiritual warfare.

The Christian movements that have had the most prodigious success in Asia and the global South are arguably those that were born here and then sent abroad: revivalist evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, even the charismatic movement within Catholicism and certain of the mainstream Protestant churches. Indeed, when one considers the influence American Christianity has had on the evolution of Christianity in the wider world, and considers also the effect of America's popular culture on the evolution of secular culture everywhere, one might almost conclude that America's great central and defining tension—between, as I have said, extreme forms of antiquity and modernity—has somehow reached out to draw the world into itself.

And it is a tension that—for want of that precious medium, civilization—looks likely to increase, for our extremes are becoming very extreme indeed: a modernity drained of any of the bright refinements and moral ambitions of Enlightenment reason or humanist idealism, reduced to a "high" culture of insipid ethical authoritarianism and a low culture consisting in dreary hedonism (without a hint of healthy Rabelaisian festivity), ever more explicit and repetitive celebrations of violence, sartorial and sexual slovenliness, atrocious music, and an idyllic emancipation from the fetters of literacy or (in fact) articulacy; and an antiquity of real and dynamic power, but largely uncontrolled by any mediating forces of order, stability, unity, or calm. To the dispassionate observer, there might be something exhilarating in the spectacle: the grand titanic struggle—within the very heart of their homeland—between a secular culture of militant vanity and incorruptible coarseness and a Christian culture of often purely experientialist ardor.

More prosaically speaking, though, a genuine civil religious struggle may well mark the coming decades, and how it will play out is hard to say. For the demographic reasons to which I have already adverted, as much as the social history of the United States, America is the one place in the Western world where one could conceivably see the inexorable advance of late modernity somewhat falter, or even the cultural power of the Christian global South establish something of a Northern redoubt. Ultimately, however, our strident secularity may triumph, and with it all the pathologies of cultural exhaustion. Perhaps not only will the courts, and educational establishment, and ACLU, and all the other leal servants of a constitutional principle that does not actually exist, succeed in purging the last traces of Christian belief from our licit social grammar, but we may all finally, by forces of persuasion impossible to foresee, be conducted out of the darkness of our immemorial superstitions, nationalisms, moral prejudices, and retrograde loyalties into the radiant and pure universe of the International Criminal Court, reproductive choice, and the Turner Prize. Or some kind of uncomfortable but equable balance might continue to be struck between our extremes, under the sheltering pavilion of material satisfaction and narcissist individualism. But I prefer to think otherwise, and not only because "spiritual warfare" is more interesting to write about than bland social concord.

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A culture—a civilization—is only as great as the religious ideas that animate it; the magnitude of a people's cultural achievements is determined by the height of its spiritual aspirations. One need only turn one's gaze back to the frozen mires and fetid marshes of modern Europe, where once the greatest of human civilizations resided, to grasp how devastating and omnivorous a power metaphysical boredom is. The eye of faith presumes to see something miraculous within the ordinariness of the moment, mysterious hints of an intelligible order calling out for translation into artifacts, institutions, ideas, and great deeds, but boredom's disenchantment renders the imagination inert and desire torpid.

This claim is of course completely at variance with the Enlightenment mythology of modern secularism: that faith confined mankind within an incurious intellectual infancy, from which it has only lately been liberated to pursue the adult adventure of self-perfection; that the lineaments of all reality are clear and precise, and available to disinterested rationality and its powers of representation; that moral truth is not only something upon which all reasonable persons can agree, but also something that, in being grasped, is immediately compelling; that human nature, when measured only by itself, will of course advance towards higher expressions of life rather than retreat into the insipid self-indulgence of the last men or into mere brutish lawlessness; that reason can order society best only when all supernaturalism has been banished from its deliberations; and so on (and, in Wellington's words, if you believe that, you will believe anything).

Even if, however, one does not share my view that this entire mythology is an immense banality, and that modernity as a whole has resulted not in man's emergence into maturity, but in a degrading descent into a second childhood, still one must acknowledge that all the colossal creativity of modern culture taken together is manifestly unable to rise above a certain level of aesthetic or spiritual accomplishment (despite the greatness of certain individual achievements). And even if one has so little acquaintance with religious phenomena as to imagine that there are no moments of revelation, and that behind the surface of things there move no massive shapes that the religious consciousness dimly descries and imperfectly limns, and that in short religion is nothing but a gigantic feat of willful imagination, one must still grant that it is an engagement of, precisely, will and imagination, from which springs a magnificent profusion of cultural forms.

Europe may now be its own mausoleum, but once, under the golden canopy of an infinite aspiration—the God-man—the noblest of human worlds took shape: Hagia Sophia, Chartres, Rouen, and il Duomo; Giotto and Michelangelo; Palestrina and Bach; Dante and Shakespeare; Ronsard and Herbert; institutions that endured, economies that prospered, laws that worked justice, hypocrisies but also a cultural conscience that never forgot to hate them; and the elevation of charity above all other virtues.

As an unapologetic Christian reactionary, suffering from a romantic devotion to the vanished Christian order, and to all the marvels that flowed from its glorious synthesis of Judaic and Hellenic genius, I confess I often detest American religion (no doubt superciliously) as something formless, vulgar, saccharine, idolatrous, or—to intrude theology—heretical; I continue to delude myself that Europe's spiritual patrimony need not have been squandered had it been more duly cherished and reverently guarded. At the same time, as something of an American chauvinist, I cannot help but see in our often absurd and sometimes barbarous spiritual and social ferment something infinitely preferable to the defatigation of vision, wisdom, and moral fortitude that is the evident condition of the post-Christian West. There may not be much hope that anything worth dignifying with the term "civilization" will ever emerge from American culture—but, then again, where

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religious life persists there are always possibilities.

And, if nothing else, there is such a thing as moral civilization, and that, I often think, is nowhere more advanced than among the sort of persons whose beliefs will always be a scandal to the John Spongs of the world.

I cannot help but see in our often absurd and sometimes barbarous spiritual and social ferment something infinitely preferable to the defatigation of vision, wisdom, and moral fortitude that is the evident condition of the post-Christian West.

American religion is poor in palpable splendors, true, but it is often difficult not to be amazed at, say, the virtues that southern evangelical culture is able to instill and preserve amid the wreck of modern civility and conscience: the graciousness of true hospitality; the spontaneous generosity that prompts evangelicals (even those of small substance) to donate so great a portion of their wealth to charitable relief for the developing world; the haunting consciousness of sin, righteousness, and redemption that often even the most brutal of men cannot escape and that can ennoble their lives with the dignity of repentance; a moral imagination capable of a belief in real "rebirth" (not merely "reform") and the power frequently to bring it to pass. A culture capable of such things—and of the surrender of faith necessary to sustain them—is something rare and delightful, which cannot be recovered once it is lost.

If indeed American religion was born out of the exhaustion of one set of mediating cultural and institutional structures and has yet to find any to take their place; and if American secularism was born out of the decadence of European civilization and has so far succeeded only at producing a new kind of savagery; and if the two are destined to continue to struggle for the soul of the nation, it is obvious where the sympathies of anyone anxious about the survival or even recrudescence of Western civilization should lie. I am not always entirely convinced that irreligious cultural conservatives have an unquestioned right to lament the general decline around them, as in ungenerous moments I tend to see them as its tacit accomplices, whose devotion to the past I suspect of having more the character of nostalgia than commitment; but I should think such persons would not be indifferent to religion.

For, if we succumb to post-Christian modernity, and the limits of its vision, what then? Most of us will surrender to a passive decay of will and aspiration, perhaps, find fewer reasons to resist as government insinuates itself into the little liberties of the family, continue to seek out hitherto unsuspected insensitivities to denounce and prejudices to extirpate, allow morality to give way to sentimentality; the impetuous among us will attempt to enjoy Balzac, or take up herb gardening, or discover "issues"; a few dilettantish amoralists will ascertain that everything is permitted and dabble in bestiality or cannibalism; the rest of us will mostly watch television; crime rates will rise more steeply and birth rates fall more precipitously; being the "last men," we shall think ourselves at the end of history; an occasional sense of the pointlessness of it all will induce in us a certain morose feeling of impotence (but what can one do?); and, in short, we shall become Europeans (but without the vestiges of the old civilization ranged about us to soothe our despondency).

Surely we can hope for a nobler fate. Better the world of Appalachian snake handlers, mass revivals, Hispanic Pentecostals, charismatic Catholics, and millenarian evangelicals (even the gnostics among them); better a disembodied, violent, and even Dionysiac hunger for God than a dis-

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pirited and eviscerate capitulation before material reality; and much better a general atmosphere of earnest, if sometimes unsophisticated, faith.

My "epiphany" of twenty years ago, on the rail platform in England, was undoubtedly lacking in a certain balance, but the intuition that lay behind it was correct: that material circumstances (unless they are absolutely crushing) possess only such gravity or levity as one's interpretation of them; and how one interprets them is determined not merely by one's personal psychology, but by the cultural element in which they subsist. The almost luxuriant squalor of that railway station, had I found myself confronted by it in some corner of America, might have seemed a bleak disfigurement of the greater world in which I lived; it might even have struck me as depressingly emblematic of the profound hideousness of late industrial society and its inevitable utilitarian minimalism, but I do not believe it would have seemed to me the dark mystical epitome of a nation's soul.

Allowing for all the peculiarities of personal temperament, and for the special pathos that homesickness can induce, my reaction to my miserable surroundings was a real—if inevitably subjective—awakening to a larger cultural and spiritual truth. Either the material order is the whole of being, wherein all transcendence is an illusion, or it is the phenomenal surface—mysterious, beautiful, terrible, harsh, and haunting—of a world of living spirits. That the former view is philosophically incoherent is something of which I am convinced; even if one cannot share that conviction, however, one should still be able to recognize that it is only the latter view that has ever had the power—over centuries and in every realm of human accomplishment—to summon desire beyond the boring limits marked by mortality, to endow the will with constancy and purpose, and to shape imagination towards ends that should not be possible within the narrow economies of the flesh.

In any event, whatever one makes of American religion—its genially odd individualism, or its often ponderous stolidity, or its lunatic extremism, or its prodigies of kitsch, or its sometimes unseemly servility to a national mythology, or simply its unostentatious pertinacity—it is as well to realize that it is far more in harmony with the general condition of humanity throughout history than are the preposterous superstitions of secular reason or the vile ephemeralities of post-Christian popular culture. It is something alive and striving, which has the power to shelter innumerable natural virtues under its promises of supernatural grace. Most importantly, its strength and vitality portend something that might just survive the self-consuming culture of disenchantment; for, while it is possible that modernity may not have very much of a future, antiquity may very well prove deathless.

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Furst among equals

by Brooke Allen

Since 1988, the American writer Alan Furst has written seven books that for want of a more precise term might be called "historical thrillers." The close of the Cold War, some believe, has put an end to the great spy novel tradition that began with John Buchan and was carried on by Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming, and John le Carré. Le Carré has come to terms with the new world order by changing and expanding his genre, letting his spymaster George Smiley die a not premature death and turning his attention toward the skullduggery of corporations and politicians. Alan Furst, a latecomer to the game, has responded to the chaotic present by ignoring it and fixing his attention firmly, and sharply, on the past—specifically, on continental Europe between 1933 and 1945.

Furst has rightly been called a master of atmospherics. As is often the case with such virtuosi, he is at his best when fiddling the high note of nostalgia, describing a scene that has vanished and will never reappear. In *Kingdom of Shadows* (2000), he can describe a dinner at an ancient Hungarian estate, for instance, without having to spell out the crude truth that it is doomed; the reader's own knowledge of the country's Communist takeover makes that clear.

> Dinner for twelve. Venison from Hrubal's forest, trout from his stream, sauce from his red currants and sauce from his figs, a traditional salad—lettuce dressed with lard and paprika—and burgundy, Bull's Blood, from the Hrubal vineyards.
>
> They ate in the small dining room, where the walls were lined with red satin, sagging, here and there, in melancholy folds and well spotted with champagne, wax, and blood. "But it proves the room," Hrubal said. "Last burned in 1810. A long time, in this part of the world." Dinner was eaten by the light of two hundred candles. Morath felt the sweat running down his sides.

And here, in a passage from *The Polish Officer* (1995), is a cavalry barracks in Warsaw during the German invasion of Poland: again, the informed reader (and an uninformed one would not find Furst an easy read) is aware that this scene brings down a closing curtain on a thousand years of chivalric tradition, for the Wehrmacht's invasion of Poland, spearheaded by tanks, proved the ineffectiveness of horse-based cavalry against twentieth-century technology and ended it forever as a significant military force.

> They walked in the stables of the cavalry barracks, added to the Savka fortress when the Tenth Polish Hussars rode with Bonaparte in the Napoleonic Wars. The indoor riding ring—a floor of raked dirt below ax-hewn beams—was by tradition the regimental *champ d'honneur*; not just pistols at thirty paces, but duels on horseback with cavalry sabers.

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> Beyond the riding ring, the horse barns. The horses stamped their hooves and whickered softly as the officers approached. The air smelled good to de Milja; manure and straw, autumn evening and Vyborg's cigar. . . . A cloud of gnats hung in the still air, the light fading slowly from dusk into darkness.

And then, too, there is everybody's fantasy—most of all, perhaps, an American fantasy—of Mediterranean Europe before it was wrecked by mass tourism. To pick just one spot among many (from *Kingdom of Shadows*): Juan-les-Pins, 1939.

> A wash in the sulphurous, tepid water that trickled into the rust-stained tub, then sweaty, inspired love on the coarse sheet. Half asleep, they lay beneath the open window, breathing the pine resin on the afternoon wind. At dusk, the cicadas started, and went on until dawn. Sometimes they would take a taxi up to the restaurant on the *moyenne* corniche above Villefranche, where they brought you bowls of garlicky *tapenade* and pancakes made of chickpea flour and then, finding you at peace with the world and unable to eat another bite, dinner.

These citations combine a superb command of descriptive prose with intensive research. Furst has immersed himself not only in the political and social history of his chosen territory but also in its cultural ephemera. He mines material like period newsreels, magazines, newspapers, films, and music as deeply as he does history books; he also possesses, and uses, a large archive of black and white photographs of Europe under Nazi occupation. Many of the painterly touches Furst uses to adorn his fiction could only be gleaned from such arcana. He is thoroughly conversant, too, with the geography of whatever region he treats, and the study of historical maps appears to be one of his specialties. He seems as familiar with the neglected corners of Europe—Ruthenia, Byelorussia—as with the Western European capitals.

The result is fiction that at its best reads like truth, and addicts of espionage lore will get a satisfying fix from the countless tiny details Furst includes in his novels. His depiction of the backbreaking drudgery and attention to minutiae involved in espionage work is unparalleled. This is an area most spy writers gloss over in their eagerness to keep the action moving along briskly, but Furst knows that to the real junkie of the genre the details in themselves exert a fascination that mere derring-do cannot equal. In one of his countless striking scenes, Furst has American OSS officers, posing as old clothes dealers, greeting European immigrants at New York Harbor and purchasing their used garments: undercover agents, after all, could not be parachuted into occupied Europe outfitted by Brooks Brothers. In another memorable sequence, ancient Polish crones scavenge through the garbage dump of a German garrison in early 1940, then sell the old rags they collect to a strange man. These rags get turned over to a patriotic Polish chemist.

> An analysis of seventy-five samples selected from a range of over five thousand cotton patches bearing traces of the oil used to clean and maintain weapons showed no meaningful variation in the viscosity of the oil. Samples were obtained from disposal areas abandoned by Wehrmacht units in September of 1939—in eastern, now Russian-occupied, Poland—and these were compared with samples from bases currently occupied in Silesia, East Prussia, and western Poland. The analyzed material, a lightly refined petroleum-based oil also used in machine shops for lubrication and protection of bored and rifled metal surfaces, had not been significantly altered during the seven-month period in question. The viscosity of the oil was consistent to a low temperature of -5 Fahrenheit, but below that point effectiveness was rapidly degraded. For the maintenance and cleaning of rifled weapons below -5 Fahrenheit, a lower viscosity, lighter-weight oil would be required.

In other words, there will be no German invasion of Russia *this* year.

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All this is fabulous stuff, and best of all, it is real: Furst bases his plots on actual operations by the NKVD, MI6, the OSS, and underground networks in occupied Europe such as the FTP (*Francs-Tireurs et Partisans*), the clandestine action group of the French Communist Party. Because Furst is so faithful to historical truth, his novels are valuable historical documents as well as fiction, in the same way that nonfiction classics like David Stafford's *Spies Beneath Berlin*, Anthony Cave Brown's *Bodyguard of Lies*, and Pavel Sudoplatov's *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness—A Soviet Spymaster* are valuable.

From this point of view, the most fascinating of Furst's books is his first, *Night Soldiers* (1988). (He actually wrote three potboilers earlier in his life, as well as a commissioned biography of Mrs. Fields of cookie fame, but I will respect his own stated wish that these be ignored.) *Night Soldiers* follows the fortunes of a young Bulgarian, Khristo Stoianev. After having seen his brother murdered by local fascists in 1934, Khristo is an easy recruit when a Soviet operative comes to the village. This Russian, Antipin, brilliantly plays on the fear and rage of helpless villagers like Khristo. His method is clear enough: "If the fascists were after you, to whom could you turn? To the East, of course. Now, let us provoke the fascists: they will drive the sheep, we shall have the wool."

Khristo is taken to Moscow and enrolled in the NKVD "kindergarten," a school for future operatives. He excels in practical operations but is perplexed by the theoretical curriculum: "Political history and thought, a crosshatch of plots and counterplots, irredentist imperialism, Pan-Slavism, the sayings of Lenin, the revelations of Marx. The world was not as he thought." As the final test of his indoctrination, he is asked to assassinate his delightful girlfriend, who turns out to be a German spy—or so say his preceptors.

We become genuinely wrapped up in the fortunes of Khristo and his close colleagues at the school—a brilliant Romanian Jew named Ilya Goldman; Drazen Kulic, a Yugoslav tough; Voluta, a Polish patriot—and we come to understand the philosophy of the Soviet recruitment system. It is, Khristo realizes, "a system based on the portcullis. . . . A system of two gates. A visitor entered through the first gate—no questions asked. It locked behind him. He was now confronted by a second gate, held a virtual prisoner in a small space." He and his friends will, it seems, never be free again.

There is wonderful material on the NKVD at work and play, like the orgiastic banquet, hosted by the terrifying Genrikh Yagoda, at which Khristo is inducted as a full NKVD member.

> When the drinking slowed, the eating began. Ukrainian pork soup full of chopped red cabbage and garlic, cold peas with vinegar and salt, chicken stewed in cream. These he tasted, then filled up on hunks of black bread with sweet butter, first inhaling deeply of the bread—a time-honored curative for vodka drinking. . . .
>
> [Later, in the sauna]: They were all roaring drunk by this time. They undressed in the yellow cedar antechamber, a large room decorated with Russian Orthodox icons, old wooden ones from country churches. . . . When all were undressed, Yagoda proposed a blasphemous toast. Raised his glass and called the saints faggots and whores, proposed a list of sexual indecencies and drank to each. Then, inspired, he ran to the wall where his clothing hung and reappeared with a pair of revolvers. The group shouted and clapped, howled with laughter and urged him on. Yagoda the Chemist, his glasses fogged, thick grey hair curling along the tops of his shoulders, began firing into the icons.

The book, a long one, maintains its quality and pace nicely. The scene shifts to revolutionary Spain, where Khristo and various colleagues act as undercover Soviet agents. The chaos of Spain in 1936, where there were committees for everything—for the distribution of food, for health and

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sanitation, for education, for grievances, for justice, for the moral improvement of youth—and where mutually hostile political organizations and foreign governments plotted and maneuvered behind the mask of Republican solidarity—is beautifully depicted, as are, again, the stringent demands of undercover work. ("The role of case officer," Khristo observes, "demanded an actor of extraordinary range: mother's warmth, father's discipline, the acuity of a favorite teacher, the strength of a playing-field hero.") The differences between ideology and political expediency, and the manipulation of the one by the other, runs the gamut from the Soviet agents, who are neither idealists nor true communists but simply functionaries compelled, on pain of death, to perform their unsavory jobs, to a young American woman, "a passionate idealist, in love with the idea of democracy."

With the fall of Madrid and the end of the Spanish war, the characters are dispersed. The Siberian gulag; the Moscow purges; prewar Paris, where Khristo does a perilous stint as a waiter in the glittering Brasserie Heininger, whose fascist-leaning Bulgarian headwaiter is assassinated on the job; the Santé prison in Paris; and, lest any potentially dramatic material be left out, a long episode in which Khristo joins a band of village resistance fighters, led by a young American, in the French *maquis*. Furst takes the opportunity not only to capture the daily terrors of these lives on the edge but also to compare national methods as an extension of national character: the NKVD, Khristo reflects, "would have woven an elaborate conspiracy to achieve the same results, using coercion, ideology—whatever human pressure point could be laid bare. The Americans, on the other hand, fought with money and technology, and they were extravagant with both." He finds that "they were brave, the Americans, and ingenious to a fault, but they neither liked nor understood security. That took an iron fist, and they and their forefathers had fled the iron fists of the world since the beginning of their country."

Despite the huge area of ground he covered, in *Night Soldiers* Furst succeeded in retaining the unified vision without which such a book cannot hold together. This is largely because in Khristo Stoianev he created a character we can both believe in and pull for: a pawn of circumstances whose intelligence and basic decency render him, in the end, not quite as helpless as he had thought. It is only in the area of romantic love that Furst falters, as he continues to do in nearly every subsequent book: when it comes to the fair sex he becomes fatally unbalanced. His heated descriptions of Khristo's beloved, Aleksandra, show just how far astray Furst can go when he lets his fantasies get out of hand:

> Next, she was hungry. It meant they had to get dressed all over again and go out in the rain, joining the carly workers in the café on the corner. Every eye went to Aleksandra as they entered. She peered out at the world from beneath a yellow straw hat—a 'boater,' with circular crown and flat brim—wore a green wool muffler looped around her neck, and was lost in the immensity of Khristo's sheepskin jacket while he made do with a heavy sweater. To top it off, she was smoking a thin, gold Turkish cigarette. The workingmen in the café acknowledged her entrance with great affection. She was so *titi*—the classic Parisian street urchin, given to storm-blown passions yet impossibly adorable—towing her coatless lover into a café so early in the rainy morning, so delighted with her own eccentricity yet so vulnerable—blond shag hanging down to her eyes—that every one of them felt obliged to desire her. For she was, if only for a moment, some girl they'd once loved.

It's enough to make any sensitive reader barf, and it is an ominous portent of the sentimental rot that begins, more or less with this passage, to eat away at Furst's fine work.

His next novel, though, *Dark Star* (1991), is as fresh, informative, and punchy as its

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predecessor, and its hero is even better than Khristo—because he is more fallible, even slightly buffoonish. A correspondent for *Pravda*, André Szara is a Russified Polish Jew who fought in the Red Army during and after the Revolution. "For twelve years—until 1929, when Stalin finally took over—he lived in a kind of dream world, a mythical country where idealistic, intellectual Jews actually ran things, quite literally a country of the mind."

Stalin, of course, changed it all. Szara became a prisoner of the system and got drawn into espionage work not from conviction but because he found it impossible to resist the regime's strong arm. His "extramarital affair with the services had been simple in the beginning . . . for they'd used him as an intellectual, an agent of influence, and he'd liked it, found it flattering to be trusted. Now he had gotten in over his head, and he had no doubt it would kill him."

Through Szara, Furst delves into the NKVD's cynical use of psychology. Szara is summoned to a meeting; he fears that he will be killed when he arrives. Should he flee? Is he being followed? He thinks not: "They had something better, a kind of invisible cable, the method the psychologist Pavlov used with laboratory animals. It was called—he had to look for the word—conditioning. His last day on earth, yet he did what he was told. His mind stood off and watched the scene: a man of intellect, independence, delivering himself to the *apparat*. Pitiful. Contemptible. Szara glanced at his watch. He didn't want to be late."

Szara is eventually sent to Paris to direct a network of Soviet spies, code-named OPAL. The direction of the network, the variety of characters involved in it, and the nuts and bolts of the actual spying process are fascinating; the use of atmosphere is magnificent; there is even considerable humor, which is not always the case with Furst. Szara's bumbling, farcical efforts to stake out a safe house where a high-level Nazi is staying, his consternation when the Nazi's secret visitor turns out to be a prominent Soviet politician (a hint at the imminent Nazi-Soviet pact) and the tragic results of the stake-out read like a little novel in its own right.

The Russians, inured to violence by decades of war, civil war, and brutal power-struggles, are the canniest players in Szara's world if not necessarily the wisest. Furst is amused by the relative naiveté of other nations: the American lefties' assumption, for example, that the burning of the New York offices of a left-wing publication is the work of J. Edgar Hoover and his goons rather than what it really (and more obviously) was, a hit by *Stalin's* goons. Or the Germans' shock in 1939: "that civilized nations—the British at any rate, not the unbathed French—would side with the Poles and the Jews and the other Slavic trash was simply beyond comprehension." Or the trauma experienced by the French left wing upon their discovery of the Nazi-Soviet pact: "Weeping and moaning and gnashing of teeth. . . . Some people were quite literally stunned—walking about the streets of Paris and were heard to make doleful and solemn declarations: 'I have determined to break with the party.' There were even suicides. What, Szara wondered, had they thought they were playing at? Philosophy?"

Night Star has a few set pieces that fix themselves in the memory. One is the bombing of Lvov, which Furst portrays with such an appeal to every sense that it is hard to believe he did not witness it. Another features Szara waking up in a barn deep in the Polish countryside, looking at his surroundings as though they might be a mirage.

> There were three men on the road. Men from a dream. They wore black shoes and black leggings and long black hats with broad brims. They were bearded, and long sidelocks curled from beneath the brims of their hats. Hasidim, he thought, on their way to *shul*. Their faces were white as chalk. One of them turned and looked at him, a look without curiosity or challenge; it took note of a man

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> watching from the window of a barn, then it turned away, back toward the road. They made no sound as they walked, and then, like black and white ghosts in a dream, they vanished.

Szara's story is complete in itself, but it also works as a reflection of the ominous political events with which Furst juxtaposes Szara's experiences—the purges; the ousting of Yezhov and the ascendance of Beria; the replacement of Litvinov with Molotov. Most provocative, perhaps, is the theme that Furst weaves throughout the narrative: the examination of a strange interdependent relationship between Russia and Germany that exists on both a personal and a historical level. "Trust and suspicion, love and hate, magnetism and repulsion." There is and has long been, Szara feels, a sort of psychological collaboration between these apparently different nations.

Hugely popular in England, Furst has only recently gained fame in the United States. Why the difference? It is probably because these novels appeal to a European rather than an American sense of the past. Recent American culture has shown plenty of interest in World War II—witness the success of *The Good War, The Greatest Generation, Saving Private Ryan*, and others—but these are tellings that flatter American sensibilities and portray the war as a straightforward battle between good and evil in which American military might, know-how, honesty, and democracy saved the world. Europeans, though, even sixty years on, are still confronted with memories and evidence of individual cowardice, cupidity, and betrayal as well as great courage. They recall that while some moral issues were indeed black and white ones, most of them were actually a murky gray. They look at their friends and neighbors, parents and grandparents and see those who might have colluded with totalitarian regimes or betrayed the innocent and the vulnerable.

Furst's characters struggle within this contingent moral realm. His heroes are, as a rule, anti-heroic types who discover almost to their surprise that they hold deep-seated principles for which they are willing to sacrifice their own lives. The most characteristic of these protagonists (though certainly not the most believable) is Jean Casson, a Parisian film producer who plays the leading role in both *The World at Night* (1996) and *Red Gold* (1999). Casson, fortyish, has always considered himself a bit of a lightweight. He makes the sort of genre film for which the French were famous in the 1930s and 1940s: stories about gangsters or doomed lovers, with titles like *No Way Out*, *Last Train to Athens*, *The Devil's Bridge*, *Night Run*. His private life is pleasurable and self-indulgent: separated from his glossy, *bon chic-bon genre* wife, Marie-Claire, he has his pick of attractive females and invitations to elegant dinners in the *seizième arrondissement*.

But with the Occupation, Casson drifts away from his circle of friends, all of whom bow to what they see as the inevitable and find a way of working with—and making money from—the Germans. Furst does not ask us to judge them too harshly. The Occupation only lasted a few years, and nowadays it seems that its temporary nature must have been obvious to those who went through it, but Furst reminds us that this was absolutely not the case: when one of Casson's friends, in *The World at Night*, gives his opinion that the Germans might stay for twenty years, Casson is "stunned. If that were true, life could not be suspended, left in limbo until the Germans went home. It would have to be lived, and one would have to decide how."

Marie-Claire and her friends are not villains; they are mere *débrouillards*, people who find a way of getting by and getting along with whoever is in power: in *Red Gold*, the Germans are *affreux*, dreadful, but "not so *affreux*, of course, that one refused to get rich off of them." Casson, unable to compromise himself so crudely, decides to work clandestinely against the system when he is asked. It means he must go underground and give up the comforts he had al-

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ways taken for granted ("In the old days his dinners had drifted down from heaven, like manna. Life was easy, attractive men were fed.") As an undercover agent—first for the British services, then for the FTP—he moves to the margins of life and must scrape for survival.

It is promising thriller material, but the problem is that, with Jean Casson, Furst crosses the line between romance and bullshit. "The man who had lived here, the producer Jean Casson, Jean-Claude to his friends, little jokes, small favors, a half-smile, *maybe we should make love*—what had become of him?" As this sentence indicates, Casson is a stage Frenchman, a *Gauloise*-smoking American fantasy—to be played, perhaps, by Gabin or Belmondo. Furst has been moving subtly in this direction for quite a while: from his first two heroes, solid, real, fallible, he had moved on to a more romantic figure, an aristocrat—Alexander de Milja of *The Polish Officer*, the glamorous relic of a dying world. De Milja, not too exaggerated, was acceptable, but Jean Casson goes too far. So, too, does his love interest, a piquant *gamine* of an actress who goes by the screen name of Citrine. Please!

The schlock movie style extends, here in *Red Gold*, beyond the central characters, and when Casson is recruited by the FTP the recruiting agent's dialogue sounds as though it might have come out of one of his own films: "Well, Casson, perhaps you're in luck. You may not have found patriotism, but it appears, God save us all, to have found you." Now we all know, and so does Furst, that nobody talks like this. When such nonsense pops up in his novels it ruins the carefully stage-managed effects.

Why are these fantasy elements offensive when Furst uses them and not, for example, when Ian Fleming does? James Bond is pure fantasy, after all. The difference lies in the fact that James Bond is *all about* fantasy, with Fleming making no attempt whatever at realism. Furst, however, goes to great pains to make his books as real as possible and to set his scenes impeccably. His evil instruments of totalitarianism are the SS and the NKVD, not SPECTRE or SMERSH. When his characters start mouthing clichés that make them sound exactly like Yves Montand or Michelle Morgan in their most melodramatic roles, then, the phoniness stands out badly, especially because we know Furst can do so much more. His scenes can conjure up visions of B-movies, but they can conjure up great ones, too (a sequence in which a Wehrmacht officer lodges with an intimidated French family poignantly recalls Jean-Pierre Melville's magnificent *Le Silence de la Mer*). They also bring to mind paintings and photographs. Countless Furst images are straight Brassaï, a fact of which I think he is both aware and proud.

Furst's unfortunate tendency to romantic overkill is nowhere more obvious than in his treatment of Paris, his dream city, the sleeping princess at the heart of occupied Europe. The following from *The World at Night* is only too typical:

> He walked down Marbeuf and turned onto the Champs-Elysées. At twilight the city throbbed with life, crowds moving along the avenue, the smells of garlic and frying oil and cologne and Gauloises and the chestnut blossom on the spring breeze all blended together. The cafés glowed with golden light, people at the outdoor tables gazing hypnotized at the passing parade. To Casson, every face—beautiful, ruined, venal, innocent—had to be watched until it disappeared from sight. It was his life, the best part of his life; the night, the street, the crowd. There would always be wars, but the people around him had a strength, an indomitable spirit. *They cannot be conquered*, he thought. His heart swelled. He'd made love all his life—his father had taken him to a brothel at the age of twelve—but this, a Paris evening, the fading light, was his love affair with the world.

This *echt*-American Paris-worship is worse than a cliché: it is twaddle. Furst has stated his opinion that Paris is the key to everything, the center of civilization. Perhaps he

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is right. Hitler, for one, agreed with him, and Furst makes effective sport of the Nazi treatment of the conquered capital as a sort of giant theme park, with an organization called *Jeder Einmal in Paris* sponsoring trips to Paris, as though to Disneyland, for ordinary German workers. But Furst himself is guilty of the same fetishization and kitschification of the city, and when we read his slobbering descriptions we half expect to hear Piaf on a soundtrack or glimpse Maurice Chevalier sauntering down the boulevard.

Furst's penchant for the happy ending is another symptom of his romanticism, and this, too, is sometimes at odds with his great gift for concrete description. (Although it is not really fair to describe his endings as *happy*; they are, rather, mutedly optimistic.) The hero always stays alive, and usually gets the girl, or at any rate *some* girl. He lives to fight on, hard-bitten and disillusioned but not a cynic, not quite. This is in keeping with the genre, but not with Furst's ambitions to be more than a genre writer, ambitions he has not denied when quizzed by interviewers.

In his efforts to lift his fiction from genre work to literature, he has streamlined his novels quite severely. *Night Soldiers* and *Dark Star* were substantial reads, both over four hundred pages in the Random House editions. The subsequent books have gotten shorter: the most recent, *Blood of Victory*, is a mere 237 pages. Furst, according to his own statements, has purposely shortened the books in an effort to condense, to compel the reader to attend to what is *not* written—to improve his work on a literary level, in other words.

He is following, I think, a wrong track. Furst's strong suit has never been character; it is, and has always been, his extraordinary command of details. His heroes, when one has read all the books, are pretty interchangeable. Szara is better than Casson; de Milja and Nicolas Morath, of *Kingdom of Shadows*, are somewhere in between; the latest, a Russian journalist named Ilya Serebin, is unremarkable. The heroines, from the preposterous Citrine to *Dark Star*'s almost-but-not-quite-believable Nadia Tscherova, are worse. Supporting characters, for the most part, are not particularly memorable.

No, what is really superlative in Furst's books is the nitty-gritty, the atmosphere, the materiality. A nighttime tour of the uneasy borderland between Moravia and Bohemia on the eve of Czechoslovakia's collapse. A 1937 meeting in *Dark Star* of the Georgian *khvost* of the NKVD, where, in "altogether a traditional sort of gathering, as though in a coffeehouse in Baku or Tashkent," tribal powerbrokers plan the brutal overthrow of their ancient ethnic enemies. Or the discomfiture in *The Polish Officer* of an undercover agent—in this case, de Milja—having to play a role for which he is in every way ill-fitted:

> Lezhev found it damned hard to be Lezhev. The toasts, the snippets of poems, and all that whooping and carrying-on—his version of a Russian poet *loved and lived life to the hilt*. Sometimes he silently apologized to poor Lezhev's shade; clearly he hadn't loved life all that much, but [the German officer] seemed responsive to the performance so that's where he pitched it, with Genya loving life to the hilt right beside him.

This sort of thing is what makes Furst terrific. There is no shame in being a genre writer; it's possible, even, that there have been fewer first-rate genre writers than first-rate literary novelists. If Furst forgets about being "important" and concentrates on fulfilling his considerable, if highly specialized, gifts, his work and stature will surely continue to grow.

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Reflections on the black cap

by Anthony Daniels

A friend of mine has just been made a High Court judge. Among the majestic paraphernalia that he has had to acquire—the scarlet robes, the wigs full-bottomed and otherwise, the pressed white gloves, the satin gaiters, the silver buckles and so forth—is a square of black silk, the Black Cap, that the court usher places on top of his wig before he pronounces the death penalty: or rather, would have had to place on top of his wig had the death penalty not been abolished in England thirty-eight years ago.

It seems that the judges' kit-list has fallen a little behind legal reality, whether through nostalgia for a better past, or in the faint hope of restoration, or through the slight inertia that preserves us (or used to preserve us) from ill-judged and over-hasty innovation, it is not for me to say. I do not think my friend would have cared much in any case to pronounce in public those magniloquent dread words—The sentence of the Court is that you be taken hence to a lawful prison, and that you be there hanged by the neck until you are dead; and that your body be buried within the precincts of the prison in which you shall have been confined after your conviction; and may the Lord have mercy on your soul!—the utterance of which is said by his many detractors to have given one of the last great hanging judges of England, Lord Chief Justice Goddard, a pleasure that was almost sexual.

I suspect that it would now be very difficult to restore the death penalty in England, not for legal reasons (Parliament can do whatever it likes), but for practical ones: while willing hangmen—or should they be called hangpersons?—could no doubt be found, in quite large numbers too, among the population, the willing doctors, prison governors, and chaplains who have always been essential to properly conducted executions probably could not be so found.

Scott Turow, the lawyer, thriller writer, and erstwhile member of Governor George Ryan's Commission in Illinois on the law relating to capital punishment, as well as the author of *Ultimate Punishment: A Lawyer's Reflections on Dealing with the Death Penalty*,[1] sees in the European revulsion against capital punishment, and in Europe's assumption of moral superiority vis-à-vis the United States in this respect, a sign of the historically inferior level of legitimacy of European governments compared with that of the United States.

> I am one of those who tend to find Western European criticisms of [American] capital punishment somewhat misplaced. Despite Western Europeans' frequent self-congratulation on their civility, it is, in fact, their democracies that have been repeatedly overwhelmed by dictators. Where democracy has proven fragile, the day seems far less remote

1 *Ultimate Punishment: A Lawyer's Reflections on Dealing with the Death Penalty*, by Scott Turow; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 164 pages, $18.

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> when another madman can commandeer the power of the state to kill his enemies . . . we must bear in mind that American opinion about capital punishment is subtly dependent on the extraordinary stability of our democratic institutions.

Mr. Turow is certainly right about Western European smugness, examples of which are not difficult to find. The Benetton advertising campaign, which used the faces of American prisoners on death row, was one such. The introduction to a new British edition of Victor Hugo's abolitionist novella, *The Last Day of a Condemened Man*, first published in 1827, says that the book "breathes a powerful, angry message to the age of the electric chair and the lethal injection in the US, and the Taliban's executions on the football ground of Kabul." I don't suppose the offensiveness of this particular juxtaposition needs to be pointed out. And in a recently published French book, *La peine de mort aux Etats-Unis*, we read:

> It suffices to listen to what is said in Europe, what is seen on its television screens, what is read in is newspapers, especially in France, to realise that among the most serious accusations made against American society is the existence of the death penalty.

As it happens, though, France was the last country in Western Europe to abolish the death penalty, in 1981, which is hardly several historical epochs ago. Moreover, a considerable proportion of the French population still supports the death penalty, as does the British. In fact, if representative government were merely a matter of reflecting the population's wishes, the death penalty in Britain would never have been abolished and would be re-instituted forthwith. Contrary to what Turow says, public opinion in Europe is not so very different from that in America. The real difference is in elite opinion. In Europe, the death penalty has almost no defenders among intellectuals, whereas in America it still has many. There has been a kind of moral gestalt switch in Europe, of the kind that took place in the United States immediately after desegregation. Immediately after its abandonment, a deeply entrenched customary practice appeared so morally reprehensible that its intellectual and emotional defenders fell silent and a return to it therefore became an impossibility.

Mr. Turow is the latest in a long line of authors to tackle the subject of capital punishment. Very few have ever had a good word to say for it, the most notable exception being Dr. Johnson, who thought that executions should be public or they would fail in their deterrent effect. In general, one does not gain a public reputation for compassion by ardent recommendation of the ax, the garrotte, the firing squad, the rope, the electric chair, or even the pleasantly fatal injection. Mr. Turow is unusual, therefore, in that he does not appear to have made up his mind about capital punishment before he wrote. Having been a state prosecutor for a short time, he was aware that some crimes are so horrible and some men so wicked that death seems the only just desert for them, and that special pleading is required to free the mind of this natural response; as a lawyer working *pro bono* in cases of miscarriages of justice, however, he was aware of the fallibility of the judicial system (all judicial systems), and that the wrong men have been executed not just on rare occasions, but with monotonous regularity.

Gone are the days, if they ever existed, when the person hanged for a crime he did not commit could console himself (at least in the opinion of the Archdeacon William Paley, DD, he of *Natural Theology* [1802] and the comparison of the universe with a watch) that he died for his country. This is a form of patriotism that has not really caught on. To the contrary, the execution of the wrong man is not only a monstrous injustice in itself, but it also brings the law into precisely that kind of disrepute that serves future criminals in their self-justification.

Mr. Turow's unpolemical tone is most

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unusual in writing about capital punishment. Only rarely does he succumb to conventional modern pieties, for example writing on page 13 that criminals "do not think much of themselves and they are inclined, as a result, to treat others cruelly." This is a genuflection in the direction of the ghastly, shallow modern theory of the origin of suffering and evil, from anorexia to Auschwitz, that it is all caused by a lack of self-esteem, of people not loving themselves enough. In fact, only those already hopelessly mired in the horrible morass of egotistic solipsism can even ponder the question of whether they like themselves, whatever answer they give.

Mr. Turow also accepts uncritically the orthodox opinion that racism is to America what original sin is to the whole of mankind, namely an ineradicable stain that no official policy or change in personal conduct can wash away. Thus when to his surprise the commission on which he sat found that white murderers were two and a half times more likely to have the death penalty applied to them in Illinois than black murderers, he comes up with an interpretation that preserves intact the state's original sin, and thus his own rectitude. Since white murderers murder mostly whites, and black murderers mainly blacks, the Illinois criminal justice system values a white life at two and a half times a black life. One hesitates to imagine what he would have written if the figures had been the other way round.

In recounting a case of a murder which, in the author's opinion, should self-evidently not be punished by the death penalty, and in which the culprit said "sorry" to the bereaved after his conviction, Mr. Turow writes that it was "a parking lot stickup gone bad." What, then, is a parking lot stickup that goes well? One in which the law-abiding citizen is relieved of his property but is uninjured? Or one in which, though injured, he survives to tell the tale? Many of the inmates of the prison in which I work, when asked what they have done, reply, "Just a normal theft," or a normal burglary, robbery, or assault. If this is how even our former state prosecutors think of such crimes, no wonder that so many of them are committed.

Nevertheless, *Ultimate Punishment* is a genuine effort of personal clarification, understanding, and discovery. That is its strength: it is rarely that one reads a book of real inquiry on a subject about which most people feel passionately. But Mr. Turow does not organize his materials very coherently (an odd shortcoming in a trial lawyer), and he is by no means an accomplished writer. One has only to compare him with writers on the subject in the past to appreciate the thinness of his book, not literally but metaphorically.

Charles Dickens, for example, wrote three letters for publication on capital punishment in 1846, when he was thirty-four years old. Executions at the time were public affairs that drew huge crowds (as they would today, if they were permitted, and as they do in those countries where they take place). Dickens was vehemently opposed to capital punishment and was a brilliant polemicist. He knew a startling fact when he saw it.

> Out of one hundred and sixty-seven persons under sentence of Death in England, questioned at different times, in the course of years, by an English clergyman in the performance of his duty, there were only three who had not been spectators of executions.

Dickens does not leave the question of deterrence there, however. He quotes figures to show that the frequency with which the death penalty is carried out does not have the effect on the murder rate that its supporters expect. He speculates brilliantly on the psychological reasons why this is not so, in the process refuting the criticism often made of him that he was a shallow or superficial psychologist.

> We come, now, to the consideration of those murders which are committed, or attempted,

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> with no other object than the attainment of an infamous notoriety. That this class of crimes has its origin in the Punishment of Death, we cannot question; because . . . great notoriety and interest attach, and are generally understood to attach, only to those criminals who are in danger of being executed.

He then describes, as only Dickens could describe, the case of one Thomas Hocker, a young man who has committed a murder:

> Bent on loftier flights than such a poor houseswallow as a teacher in a Sunday-school can take; and having no truth, industry, perseverance, or other dull work-a-day quality, to plume his wings withal; he casts about him in a jaunty way, for some mode of distinguishing himself—some means of getting that head of hair into the print-shops; of having something like justice done to his singing-voice and fine intellect; of making the life and adventures of Thomas Hocker remarkable; and of getting up some excitement in connection with that slighted piece of biography. The Stage? No. Not feasible. There has always been a conspiracy against the Thomas Hockers, in that kind of effort. It has been the same with Authorship in prose and poetry. Is there nothing else? A Murder, now, that would make a noise in the papers! There is the gallows to be sure; but without that, it would be nothing. Short of that, it wouldn't be fame. Well! We must all die at one time or other; and to die game, and have it in print, is just the thing for a man of spirit.

"The miserable wretch," says Dickens, "inflated by this lunatic conceit, arranges his whole plan for publication and effect. It is quite an epitome of his experience of the domestic melodrama or penny novel. . . . [T]he Court, where Thomas Hocker, with his dancing-master airs, is put upon his trial, and complimented by the Judge; the Prosecution, the Defence, the Verdict, the Black Cap, the Sentence—each of them a line in any Playbill, and how bold a line in Thomas Hocker's life!" He continues:

> It is worthy of remark, that the nearer he approaches to the Gallows—the great last scene to which the whole of these effects have been working up—the more the overweening conceit of the poor wretch shows itself, the more he feels that he is the hero of the hour; the more audaciously and recklessly he lies, in supporting the character. . . . He knows that the eyes in Europe are upon him; but he is not proud—only graceful. He bows, like the first gentleman of Europe, to the turnkey who brings him a glass of water. . . . In private—within the walls of the condemned cell—every word and action of his waning life, is a lie. His whole time is divided between telling lies and writing them. If he ever have another thought, it is for his genteel appearance on the scaffold; as when he begs the barber "not to cut his hair too short, or they won't know him when he comes out." His last proceeding but one is to write two romantic love letters to women who have no existence. His last proceeding (but less characteristic, though the only true one) is to swoon away, miserably, in the arms of the attendants, and be hanged like a craven dog.

Dickens is reminding us of the incalculability, and frequent frivolity, of human motivation, which perhaps explains why the direst of penalties does not exert the effect upon the conduct of a class of susceptible persons (and murder is always an infrequent crime, even in countries such as the United States, where it is more frequent than in others) that the person who thinks of man as a being that rationally weighs up alternatives expects. And how right Dickens was: I have myself dealt with the man who consciously and strenuously attempts to be the worst, most difficult, and dangerous prisoner in the country because, while mildly intelligent, he has no truth or industry in him, yet desires (how strongly!) to make his mark and appear in the newspapers, which he does with regularity, even if it is all to the obvious detriment of his own quality of life. The most notorious and sadistic killers are immediately besieged by declarations of love and offers of marriage,

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which are never forthcoming for recidivist petty criminals: it is notoriety and wickedness that awake passion, as the flame attracts the moth. I have known men boast of their infection with the AIDS virus as a means, and a highly successful means, of attracting women; I have known people deliberately to inject themselves with the blood of sufferers from AIDS.

Considering that only a very small proportion of murderers are ever executed, it is astonishing how many judicial errors have been made, in Britain as in America, and no doubt elsewhere. This was a point made by Arthur Koestler in his brilliant polemic published in 1956, *Reflections on Hanging*. Koestler knew himself what it was to be under sentence of death; perhaps that is why at the start of his book he says, "I shall never achieve real peace of mind until hanging is abolished." Cynics might suspect that what he really feared was that his serial abuse of women (up to and including rape) might one day end in murder and that he would find himself at the wrong end of a rope in the land that gave him refuge, but I leave it to moral philosophers to decide how much a man's actual conduct refutes his humanitarian sentiments. Incidentally, Victor Hugo, in his preface to *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, reports what to me sounds like a suspiciously exaggerated state of moral exaltation with regard to the death penalty. On the day of an execution, "it was like a torment that began at daybreak" and only after he had written his book had his "conscience . . . declared him innocent of complicity." Is this humbug, or are there people—very different from me—who genuinely live at this high moral temperature?

Whatever the answer, the fact is that on reading Koestler, you realize what a very mediocre writer Turow is, which is all the more startling because Koestler is writing in his fourth language, while Turow writes in his first. Koestler can make you laugh, as for example when he quotes the remark made by the Under-Sheriff of the County of London, who had attended many executions, to the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment, that "I personally have noticed that English people take their punishment better than foreigners." Koestler says, "There you are. Hanging is quite all right for Englishmen; they actually seem to like it; it is only foreigners who cause trouble."

Like Dickens, Koestler knows how to use historical examples to an effect that is quite beyond Turow's range or ability. He quotes the speech that a man, Walter Graham Rowland, wrongly condemned for having allegedly murdered a prostitute, made to the court. This speech is all the more startling in its dignity because Rowland was a well-known criminal, who had served a sentence both for attempted murder and a murder itself. When asked by the judge if he had anything to say, he replied:

> "Yes, I have, my Lord. I have never been a religious man, but as I have sat in this court during these last few hours the teachings of my boyhood have come back to me, and I say in all sincerity and before you and this court that when I stand in the Court of Courts before the Judge of Judges I shall be acquitted of this crime. Somewhere there is a person who knows that I stand here today an innocent man. The killing of this woman was a terrible crime, but there is a worse crime being committed here today, my Lord, because someone with the knowledge of this crime is seeing me sentenced today for a crime which I did not commit. I have a firm belief that one day it will be proved in God's own time that I am totally innocent of this charge, and the day will come when this case will be quoted in the courts of this country to show what can happen to a man in a case of mistaken identity. I am going to face what lies before me with the fortitude and calm that only a clear conscience can give. That is all I have got to say, my Lord."

In fact, six days later, someone came forward and confessed to the crime of which Rowland was convicted. But he was hanged nonetheless, on the extraordinary grounds

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that not to have done so would have prejudiced any case against the man who confessed, by implying that he was guilty. Mr. Turow quotes a not dissimilar case, but, because he is so much the lesser writer than Koestler, it has far less impact upon the reader.

Neither does Mr. Turow make use of an entire genre of writing about capital punishment, the execution scene itself. Perhaps he feels, as a fastidious rationalist, that this would be a low blow. But to force people to confront the actual consequences of the policies they advocate is surely a justified rhetorical maneuver.

Victor Hugo did it imaginatively in his novella, with brilliant effect. A first-person narrative of the last days and hours (right up to the guillotine) of a condemned man, this fictional account was echoed to an astonishing extent by Turgenev's documentary narrative *The Execution of Tropmann*, written forty-two years later.

Turgenev, a man of the most delicate feeling, was invited to be present at the public execution of Tropmann, a young man who had slaughtered an entire peasant family. Turgenev watched Tropmann being prepared for his execution, exactly as it occurred in Hugo's novella. He went out with him from the prison gate to the place of execution:

> Tropmann minced along nimbly—his shackles interfered with his walk—and how small he suddenly appeared to me, almost a child! Suddenly the two halves of the gates, like some immense mouth of an animal, opened slowly before us—and all at once, as though to the accompaniment of the great roar of the overjoyed crowd which had at last caught sight of what it had been waiting for, the monster of the guillotine stared at us with its two narrow black beams and its suspended axe. I saw the executioner rise suddenly like a black tower on the left side of the guillotine platform; I saw Tropmann scrambling up the steps. I saw two men appear above and two men pouncing on him from the right and left, like spiders on a fly; I saw him falling forward suddenly and his heels kicking.

Turgenev felt faint and turned away, but he

> managed to notice that the roar of the crowd seemed suddenly to roll up in a ball and—a breathless hush fell over everything. At last I heard a light knocking of wood on wood—that was the sound made by the top part of the yoke with the slit for the passage of the knife as it fell round the murderer's head and kept it immobile. Then something suddenly descended with a hollow growl and stopped with an abrupt thud.

Turgenev went back into the prison, where he learned that "Tropmann [had] suddenly thrown his head sideways convulsively so that it did not fit into the semi-circular hole. The executioners were forced to drag it there by the hair, and while they were doing it, Tropmann bit the finger of one of them." Turgenev discovered that immediately after the execution "two men took advantage of the first moments of unavoidable confusion to force their way through the lines of soldiers, and crawling under the guillotine, began wetting their handkerchiefs in the blood that dripped through the chinks of the planks."

Turgenev says—and surely he is reporting the truth—that "not one of us, absolutely no one looked like a man who realized that he had been present at the performance of an act of social justice; everyone tried to turn away in spirit and, as it were, shake off the responsibility for this murder." Dostoyevsky, certainly the most famous writer ever to have to have been reprieved a death sentence, despised Turgenev's fastidious refusal to observe the beheading itself, and wrote, "What is so comic is that at the end he turns away and does not see the last stages of the execution: 'Look, ladies and gentlemen, how nicely I have been brought up! I could not stand it!'" But this is pure spite, born of envy of Turgenev's superior social origins: for Dostoyevsky so loved and admired Hugo's book that he knew it practically by

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heart, and must have realized how closely Turgenev's observations bore out Hugo's imaginings.

George Orwell observed a hanging in Burma, and published his account in 1931. He does not tell us what the accused had done.

> The warders had formed a rough circle round the gallows. And then, when the noose was fixed, the prisoner began crying out to his god. It was a high, reiterated cry of "Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!" not urgent and fearful like a prayer or a cry for help, but steady, rhythmical, almost like the tolling of a bell. The hangman, still standing on the gallows, produced a small cotton bag like a flour sack and drew it down over the prisoner's face. But the sound, muffled by the cloth, still persisted, over and over again: "Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!"
>
> The hangman climbed down and stood ready, holding the lever. Minutes seemed to pass. The steady, muffled crying from the prisoner went on and on. "Ram! Ram! Ram!" never faltering for an instant. The superintendent, his head on his chest, was slowly poking the ground with his stick; perhaps he was counting the cries, allowing the prisoner a fixed number—fifty, perhaps, or a hundred. The Indians had gone grey like bad coffee, and one or two of the bayonets were wavering. We looked at the lashed, hooded man on the drop, and listened to his cries—each cry another second of life; the same thought was in all our minds: oh, kill him quickly, get it over, stop that abominable noise!
>
> Suddenly the superintendent made up his mind. Throwing up his head he made a swift motion with his stick. "Chalo!" he shouted almost fiercely. There was a clanking noise, and then dead silence. The Prisoner had vanished, and the rope was twisting on itself.

Somerset Maugham witnessed an execution in China:

> The rice fields began at the city wall. The criminal was led to the pathway between two patches and told to kneel down. But the officer did not think the spot suitable. He told the man to rise. He walked a yard or two and knelt down again. A soldier was detached from the squad and took up his position behind the prisoner, three feet from him perhaps; he raised his gun; the officer gave the word of command; he fired. The criminal fell forward and he moved a little, convulsively. The officer went up to him, and seeing he was not quite dead emptied two barrels of his revolver into the body.
>
> The vice-consul was carried back towards the consulate. But just as he reached the consulate he looked at his watch, he had no idea it was so late. It was time for a cocktail and by heaven he could do with one.
>
> "Everything go off all right?" [they asked].
>
> "He wriggled a bit." He turned to the bartender. "Same as usual, John."

Although Mr. Turow, with admirable honesty, comes tentatively to the conclusion that capital punishment is wrong, so tentatively as if he feared to offend some of his best friends, his book adds little to what has already been written on the subject.

I suppose that the best argument in favor of capital punishment is that, on the one hand, of the 52,000 prisoners in American convicted for homicide, about 800 have killed again. If the 52,000 had been executed—straight away, not after the many years it now takes for the sentence to be carried out—those 800 would still have been alive. On the other hand, perhaps 500 would have been wrongly executed, if the figures from Illinois are anything to go by. Kill 500 wrongly to save 800? And what of Ivan's question in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that if it were possible to create human happiness at the cost of the torture of one innocent child, would it be morally permissible?

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The voice impersonator

by Eric Ormsby

Ezra Pound is the supreme ventriloquist of American literature. Over the course of his long and often scandalous career, he turn by turn assumed the voices of a medieval Italian sonneteer of the *dolce stil nuovo* school, a Confucian sage, a Provençal bard, a Latin erotic elegist, a Noh dramatist, and even that of a transplanted Yankee modernist. Pound restlessly adopted as many guises as "kulchur" in the grandest sense could afford him. If these disparate voices still manage to display a certain shaky coherence, that is only because Pound possessed an unusual gift for the music of words; in the matter of verse he had what could be termed perfect word-pitch. How else, except through his remarkable instinct for verbal cadences, could frontier Idaho, where he was born in 1885, coalesce so improbably with Medici Florence and Han China, how else could the small-town swaggerer on his stump-pulpit conceal the troubadour? And yet, given his cranky and vicious opinions, had Pound not labored with dogged determination to cultivate his gift, he might very well have ended up as a ranting evangelist in a windy revival tent.

Pound's polyphony carries through all his twenty-six books and constitutes his signature. Of course, the larger, and unavoidable, problem with this most musical of our poets is that he too often donned the ill-fitting mask of the public intellectual; unable to trust his own individual accents, he turned into a cock-eyed purveyor of muddled dogmas. That a poet of such native talent, to which almost every page of the Library of America's wonderful new edition attests,[1] should feel so drawn to convictions—Fascism and the vilest brand of anti-Semitism chief among them—that were not merely hare-brained but downright murderous, suggests that Pound (in this at least like Faust) had "two souls, alas, dwelling within his breast." In Pound's case, however, the twin souls, locked in enforced hypostasis, were those of a sensitive lyricist and a profoundly deluded bigot. In my opinion, the virtuosic ventriloquism and the intellectual and moral shallowness are not unconnected.

In *The Cantos*, the *magnum opus* he toiled on from 1913 until his death in 1972, brilliance and blather lie so close together as to be well nigh inextricable except in judiciously sanitized anthology pieces. In the *Poems and Translations* the issue does not arise right away, or at least not so conspicuously. Throughout *The Cantos* we must pick a path amid the clotted rubble of discredited attitudes and shrill sloganeering (not to mention those deadening historical asides) to light upon amazing passages that for a moment make it all seem worthwhile:

> So that the vines burst from my fingers
> And the bees weighted with pollen

1 *Poems and Translations*, by Ezra Pound, edited by Richard Sieburth; The Library of America, 1363 pages, $45.00.

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Move heavily in the vine-shoots:
chirr—chirr—chr-rikk—a purring sound,
and the birds sleepily in the branches.

A man who can write like that (and this is only one of the many passages that I could quote) but instead turns to

But in Russia they bungled and did not
apparently
Grasp the idea of work-certificate
And started the N.E.P. with disaster

deserves to be horse-whipped, even posthumously. Pound's authority as a poet came from his command of song; too often, however, song commanded him. He followed words wherever they might lead him. He adhered, I suspect, to the puzzling line of his friend and mentor, and sometime pupil, W. B. Yeats who once wrote: "for words alone are certain good." This sounds fine but is the purest sophistry, as Yeats himself would come to realize. Words in themselves are neither good nor bad, nor are they substitutes for the things they signify. Pound the medievalist fell for that fallacy defined by the medieval logicians as the failure to distinguish between *de re* and *de dictu*, between the thing itself and an assertion about the thing, and it proved, for him, a tragic fallacy.

A further corollary to Pound's uncanny knack for mimicry is the striking anonymity of his manner as his work develops. This edition permits one to see how he moved, in stages and false starts, not merely from apprentice to master but to a kind of abolition of individual intonation. The result is that, though there is obvious progress as he sheds the Victorian mannerisms which for so long held him captive, his last work is not so strikingly different from his first. It is as though his whole career were an effort to recapture that unformed, almost generic tone which flashes briefly from certain early pieces. An example is the opening of "Cino," which appeared in his 1908 collection *A Lume Spento*, printed in Venice at his own expense:

Bah! I have sung women in three cities,
But it is all the same;
And I will sing of the sun.

Compare this with a stanza that appeared in his 1964 volume *Translations*:

I, Arnaut, love the wind, doing
My hare-hunts on an ox-cart,
And I swim against the torrent.

Certainly the later lines are more assured but the borrowed braggadocio is the same and we wonder, in both instances, as to who in fact is speaking. The *persona*, Pound's beloved mask-face, of the later poem may have a richer glaze or be more spider-webbed at the corners of the eyes but it is still a speaking surface, the masquerade of a voice, rather than a specific and irreducibly distinctive one; it would not plot on a voice-graph.

I stress this not to discredit or belittle Pound but because it is of his essence as a poet. As the man got more and more crusty, obstreperous and repellent, the poet grew ever more impersonal, translucent and serene; especially in reading his many translations from the Chinese, which occupy the major portion of the present edition, one gets the impression that, in his lyrics at least, Pound was striving not so much to be a modernist but a kind of archaic folk-poet, or, indeed, a whole folk unto himself:

With thud of the deep drum,
Flutes clear, doubling over all,
Concord evens it all, built on
The stone's tone under it all.
T'ang's might is terrible
With a sound as clear and sane
As wind over grain.

I wonder sometimes whether the strange facelessness of his most characteristic work was not a lifelong reaction to the excesses of his early period. For many years Pound was committed to deliberately archaic diction, all too evident in the present compilation. I suspect that his immersion in the language

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and literature of Italy may have been partly responsible for this unfortunate phase. Certainly his antiquarian manner is most on display in his versions of Italian poets. Italy represented the fount and origin of Pound's inspiration; he began his serious writing there and there he ended. And as much as it nourished him, Italy also—Pound's own private Italy—prompted some of his worst excesses, the ugliest of which are the Cantos (LXXII and LXXIII, for example) he composed directly in Italian (I translate a brief sample: "In the beginning, God/ the great aesthete, after having created heaven and earth . . . shat out the great usurer Satan-Geryon/prototype of Churchill's bosses"). But his involvement with that country and its tradition poses something of a puzzle. The Italian poets within Pound's wide range, from St. Francis and Cavalcanti to Leopardi—he ignored the Baroque as well as Mannerism—write a plain and straightforward Italian with few flourishes; it is, in fact, part of their glory to have scaled such heights of expression with such simple means. But when Pound comes to translate them he indulges in affectations of diction and phrasing that often seem grotesque. By contrast, his translations from the Greek, Latin, or Chinese rarely display these antics.

Of course, as anyone knows who has ever attempted to translate medieval Italian verse, it is exceedingly difficult to avoid padding, either overt or surreptitious. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whom the young Pound admiringly termed his "mother and father" in the matter of verse translation, succeeded because his highly wrought pre-Raphaelite language was his own native idiom; it was not at war with his personal manner. But for Pound, toiling in Rossetti's wake, the problem was subtler: how to "make it new" without traducing either the spirit or the forms of the originals? Victorianisms, by which I mean the use of older verb forms ("heareth," "listeth," etc.) and obsolete adverbs, among other devices, do provide a quick fix; they allow the translator to enhance the cadence of his English by providing a small lilt, especially to our monosyllabic verbs. Pound has frequent recourse to such effects, as in his otherwise excellent translation of Guido Guinicelli's sonnet "Vedut'ho la lucente stella Diana":

> I have seen the shining star of the dawn
> Appearing ere the day yieldeth its whiteness.

"Yields" would have sounded too abrupt a note while "yieldeth" suggests the ripple of the original; but at the same time, because he wants to avoid "before"—"appearing before the day" would have staggered the melody—he resorts to the outmoded "ere" and this, in league with "yieldeth," imparts a fatal mustiness to the line.

The nadir of this tendency occurs in Pound's rendering of Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega" ("A Lady Asks Me," which by an unfortunate typo became "Donna mi pregna," a "lady impregnates me" in Pound's edition!). This notoriously difficult *ballata*, perhaps the subtlest and most arcane in the Italian language, becomes even more puzzling and opaque in Pound's version, of which the following is a representative sample:

> Look drawn from like,
> Delight maketh certain in seeming
> Nor can in covert cower,
> Beauty so near,
> Not yet wild-cruel as darts,
> So hath man craft from fear
> In such his desire
> To follow a noble spirit,
> Edge, that is, and point to the dart.

Pound struggled to divest himself of such mannerisms but it was a long and painful process (admirably detailed, by the way, in *A Serious Character*, Humphrey Carpenter's 1988 biography of the poet). Interestingly enough, the Cavalcanti versions, some of which date from 1912 or thereabouts but most of which were not published until 1932 ("Donna mi prega" was finished in 1928), reveal Pound still caught up in his Victorian trammels long after he had foresworn it

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elsewhere. For a poet reluctant to write *in propria persona*, a poet with a facility for poetic impersonation but lacking his own unmistakable manner, it was perhaps irresistible to mimic an established mode of discourse and even to carry it to preposterous extremes.

In this respect, it is striking how rarely Pound chooses to translate poets possessed of an intense individuality: Cavalcanti but not Dante, Gautier but not Baudelaire, Chinese poets whose names have been lost, but not Li Po or Du Fu. Only in such more accommodating models could he discover a platform for his own impersonations. His gift was symbiotic; it needed a host to thrive.

Rather mercilessly, the present volume spares Pound (and us) nothing in reproducing some of his attempts to achieve a more direct and contemporary manner, such as the long and awful poem "Redondillas," written around 1911, where we read:

> I would sing the American people,
> God send them some civilization;
> I would sing of the nations of Europe,
> God grant them some method of cleansing
> The fetid extent of their evils.

As Walter Benjamin once remarked of Stefan George, the poet-herald of the Third Reich, never was a prophet more punished by God in having his prophecies fulfilled. The same could be said of Pound.

Thanks to Sieburth's edition, we can witness for ourselves how the great poems began to emerge from the sumps of fustian and rant. We can gauge how very far Pound had come by, say, 1919 when "Homage to Sextus Propertius" appeared. There is little in Pound's work before or after to equal that sequence:

> When, when, and whenever death closes our
> eyelids,
> Moving naked over Acheron
> Upon the one raft, victor and
> conquered together,
> Marius and Jugurtha together,
> One tangle of shadows.
>
> Caesar plots against India
> Tigris and Euphrates shall from now on,
> flow at his bidding,
> Tibet shall be full of Roman policemen,
> The Parthians shall get used to our statuary
> And acquire a Roman religion;
> One raft on the veiled flood of Acheron,
> Marius and Jugurtha together

Style and subject are inseparably melded here and the motion of the verses enchants; the alteration and varying placement of long and short lines augment the solemnity of the measure while the simplicity of the diction keeps it from turning portentous. The "Homage" is a fine example of what Pound was working towards as early as 1912 when he opened a poem with the line "I would bathe myself in strangeness." In the early poem it is still affectation; in the mature poem the strangeness has been woven into the very texture of the verse.

This is the thirteenth volume devoted to a poet or to poetry in the Library of America, and it is one of the very best. The volume itself has a plump, apostolic feel, like an old Roman Missal, and the scraggly young Pound who peers out from the jacket photo looks at once shy and supercilious. Pound often took up earlier poems in later collections and his various books overlap. Richard Sieburth, his editor, has not reproduced all these multiple inclusions and so the successive collections cannot be read here as they were issued (it is hard to see how he might have done otherwise without unduly swelling an already thick tome). His notes, both textual and factual, are exemplary and his chronology of Pound's long career is especially fine, not least because he includes numerous anecdotes and comments (some of them quite bitchy) about the poet. In certain volumes of the Library of America, the chronologies have been occasionally too sparse and not all the editions of poets have seemed as full and rich as this one. For ex-

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ample, while it is good to have Wallace Stevens in the series, the space constraints give his more ample poems a cramped look, as if a maharaja had been squeezed into a tenement (the chronology in the Stevens volume is faulty too: the editor, for reasons of her own, suppressed such facts as Stevens's death-bed conversion to Catholicism). To follow Pound's recapitulations and regroupings of his poems you will still need the admirable old New Directions imprints, but for the sheer pleasure of reading him this is the book to have.

Near the end of this commodious edition, Sieburth includes Pound's versions of two Greek tragedies. Reading these within the context of the collected poems is revelatory, for it is as if the clamoring welter of voices that had inhabited Pound from the beginning of his career were here given free and virtually pandemoniac rein. I have never seen these performed and it's hard to imagine how they might sound; the dialogue ranges—zigzags would be an apter term—from high and lofty pronouncement to bursts of transliterated Greek to kooky echoes of popular verse and song, from folk to what, with its weird redneck timbres, sounds like early Country Western:

> She's somebody, all right, all right.
> Name's Iole, and 'Rytus her father.
> And Likhas hadn't found that out
> 'cause he hadn't troubled to ask her.

Or this, from his version of "Elektra":

> Tell me, or lemme tell you what good it
> cd/ do me
> To stop objecting out loud
> I'm not dead yet, it's a dirty life
> But my own.

These versions read like a full-scale realization of Eliot's original title for *The Waste Land*: "He Do the Police in Different Voices." Significantly, what drama there is in Pound's versions of Sophocles arises not from the action but from the concatenation of divergent voices. Elektra at one point is described as bursting into song "like wild Sioux injun war dance with tommy hawks," and after chanting three lines of Greek, delivers herself of this:

> Oh to hell with all the hens
> In the old hen house
> I ain't afraid of hens
> Cause they ain't a bit of use.

Pound finished the translations while confined in St. Elizabeth's Hospital and it shows. There is something mad and pathetic and desperate in these final efforts. Yeats felt the circus animals desert him at the end but in Pound's case it seems as though the music of words had taken on terrible and uncontrollable shapes as they defected. In self-imposed exile in Italy in his final years, he fell into intractable silence, never attempting to explain his earlier actions or to summon back those voices which had once danced so willingly to the tap of his baton.

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New poems
by William Louis-Dreyfus

Calling out

It's Early Spring. The sheep will have their young.
The flock then fills with lambs a few weeks old,
Anonymous dots until each mother's call
Brings each lamb back to get its feeding done.

The ewes call out, and by each mother's sound,
Repeated like an echo round the field,
They and the lambs, wherever is the need,
Each by their own are by that calling found.

If you keep sheep and mean to do it well,
You'll try to sell the lambs for Easter night
And get your price and give the flock its blend.

The ewes remaining in the flock don't know
Their lambs are gone and keep on calling out
For three full days; and then the calling ends.

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What Einstein said

He spoke four words just before he died
heard by the nurse whose shift was ending
and who in those last days attended
the disease he sought no help to cure.
She heard him speak, but as she explained
to those eager to find a final meaning
in what had been said, she spoke
no German and did not understand.

The Father leaves and never tells us where
a final comfort lies, though he must know
if only by his blessing and goodbye.
We live ensnared by what can't be retrieved
or known, or kept, or made a refuge of,
and nothing's certain save what is departed.

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Where are the dead

Where are the dead?
They are not among us.
Between this man and that
Before the dead had died
Stood air and space and weather
And hung the smell of things.
Today, on that same street
Stand all the self-same things
Between that man and this.

Where are the dead?
They die. They disappear.
Today, when we look up,
Not anything's displaced.
No space has been reduced
Though near a man has died.
No imprint stays of him
To interrupt our view.
Only the living show.

We were the dead's increase.
Not anything that's left
Exists with them again.
The living think of life.
What secrets have we learned
That we can use to know
Why nothing can explain
If death resembles life
And where the dead have gone?

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Theater

Gay old times

by Mark Steyn

There is a kind of playwright who glitters magnificently on the surface of life. He doesn't probe for depth; he frolics in the shallows, which is where, after all, most of life takes place; and he finds depth in those shallows. Noel Coward did it: Very flat, Norfolk, but in that flatness, on the surface, the Master could skewer and enlighten.

Like Coward, Paul Rudnick is homosexual and funny and brittle, and, when he stays up the shallow end, he can be oddly deep. When he tries to be deep and heavy, he's trite and lightweight. The last time I discussed him in these pages was just under three years ago when, a few days after September 11, I went to see his *Rude Entertainment*, a gay cornucopia—a horn of plenty that had plenty going for it when it started but had less and less the more Rudnick shoveled in. The trio of one-acts was, in essence, a meditation on the changing gay sensibility—the first playlet was relentlessly shallow, about the aging queeny host of a cable show called "Too Gay"; the second playlet was digging for depth, about a gay couple desperate for a child; the third playlet was Sub-Basement Level Four deep, about the gay murder victim Matthew Shephard. The only one that resonates with me two and a half years later is the first. It was little more than half an hour of bitchy quips, but its defiant shallowness had an elegiac profundity. The host, Mr. Charles, instinctively understood that the mainstreaming of gayness would inevitably render him obsolete, a gay dinosaur, tyrannosaurus regina. His farewell sigh—"Being gay. There's a romance"—said more than all the self-consciously "heavy" meaning with which Rudnick burdened the Shephard case. He must be one of the least preachy playwrights in the world, and he sounded like a guy having to deliver a sermon he doesn't quite believe in.

Coward in his day was prone to a certain amount of agonizing. "All the time, in my deep Christian subconscious, there was the gnawing superstition that I was nothing but a jester, a foolish, superficial capering lightweight with neither depths nor real human understanding," he wrote. "For long years I searched to find a theme solemn enough to base a really important play." Fortunately he never did. He realized that his important plays were the foolish superficial capering lightweight ones. Were Paul Rudnick to caper superficially hither and yon, he too might write some important plays. But unfortunately Mr. Rudnick faces the same problem as Mr. Charles of the "Too Gay" show. He is a gay playwright living through the end of the gay sensibility.

Andrew Sullivan once wrote an essay on gay marriage and related matters called "We Are All Sodomites Now." That gets it precisely backwards, so to speak. Gays, real and fictional, caper across primetime every night of the week, from "Will and Grace" to "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," but they're desexed figures—the broader culture

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has appropriated gay wit, gay style, gay insults, but on the whole would rather pass on the gay sex. In that sense, the networks stay true to the Biblical injunction: love the sinner, but hate the sin—or, at any rate, keep it well out of sight. On "The Daily Show" a few months back, Stephen Colbert ended a parody news report on the "gaysplosion," the growing popularity of gay culture, by declaring earnestly that he too was gay. The host Jon Stewart affected surprise: he hadn't realized Colbert enjoyed sex with men. Colbert was revolted: Whaddaya mean, sex with men? What's that got to do with being "gay"?

Just so. On TV and in the movies, they're not all sodomites now, but they are all metrosexuals. The uptight straights dig the gay aesthetic, and the cutting-edge gays are too busy petitioning the Massachusetts Supreme Court or wondering whether to go with "O Promise Me" or "The Wind Beneath My Wings" for the marriage service in Vancouver. Your old-school gay playwright, just like Mr. Charles of "Too Gay," is in danger of being beached by the tides of history—for when everyone's gay, it's harder and harder to be "too gay." In *In and Out*, Rudnick got a big-time Hollywood hit out of his back catalogue of Barbra Streisand gags. But since then, it seems to me, he's struggled to find a voice he's entirely comfortable with. *Valhalla*, the divinely named comedy at the New York Theatre Workshop, is his latest attempt at finding a solution.

Its inspiration is Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, patron of Richard Wagner—hence the title—and the right royal loony of nineteenth-century Mitteleuropa. Why would Paul Rudnick be interested in Ludwig? Because he was mad about the boys, had an unhelpful mother, fabulous taste, etc. In some ways, he's Mr. Charles with a bigger budget. Thirty years ago, Visconti made an awfully sober movie called *Ludwig*, in which Helmut Berger wrestled with his inner torment for three hours—or four in the director's cut. Rudnick deals with matters more briskly. We meet Ludwig as he sails through the double doors, a ten-year-old prince in a blue velvet suit who's in love with a swan. "And when you molt," he promises his sweetheart, "we'll make pillows."

To prepare him for his kingly duties, which necessarily involve dealing with his aesthetically problematic subjects, Ludwig's mother makes him look at one of his uglier servants for an hour. The young prince decides to flatter the footman: "I love your ears. I love your eyes. I love your . . . were you in an accident?" Rudnick would seem eminently qualified to rescue the mad monarch from Visconti's maddening movie, and if he'd given us a delightful, larky one-act he would have succeeded. Peter Frechette, who plays Ludwig at all ages from knickerbockered boy to full flouncing opera queen, certainly has more fun with the role than Helmut Berger ever did. Ludwig lived his fantasies, and Visconti appeared to resent the fact. Rudnick, as you gather from the opening, has no interest in mid-nineteenth-century verisimilitude but he embraces his subject far more straightforwardly than the film does.

But he's also decided to juxtapose Ludwig's situation with another narrative, the tale of a wild teenager. In the old days, the teen would have been "troubled." Back when he was himself little more than a troubled teen, Tennessee Williams wrote:

> "I think in places known as gay,
> In secret clubs and private bars."

When gayness was a secret club—or, in W. H. Auden's wonderfully sinister designation, the Homintern—the outsider, the misfit, the nonconformist, the troubled teen were critical figures in its iconography. Sometimes, as with Williams, the material was coded. Later it didn't have to be. Now such a figure is barely credible. If you're a teen who thinks he's gay in America today, the high school will invite you to join the non-secret club for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth, and the teacher will tell you where the condom machine is and to be sure to come back and

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ask if you need any leaflets on how to do it properly.

So, in the spirit of the age, Rudnick gives us an untroubled teen—a wild Texan gay boy who shags the cutest boy in gym class, and the prom queen on the eve of her wedding, and later takes up with her groom. These developments are, in their way, not unWagnerian, but Rudnick wears his allusions lightly. This all takes place in the 1930s, which makes James Avery a far more fantastical figure than King Ludwig ever was. Like His Majesty, James is mad about the boys, has an unhelpful mother, fabulous taste, etc. And we meet him, like Ludwig, crashing through a set of double doors, a ten-year-old boy in love with a swan. A crystal swan, which he's stolen. Why? "I needed it," says James Avery. "It is beautiful." And that becomes a stock response. Unlike Bavaria, in the Lone Star State the jokes have a bleaker tone: James complains to his mother that his father beats him, and her, too. "Not as hard," she says.

How, one wonders, will Rudnick find any deeper connection between his two protagonists as he switches back and forth? Valhalla is the castle for which the Norse gods traded the Rhinegold, a paradise where they could live in youthful good health forever, though the accursed gold put a bit of a crimp in that, as it turned out. Pre-Wagner, Valhalla was the hall of the gods where Odin receives heroes fallen in battle. So, when James and his pal Henry Lee Stafford join the army, get shipped to Europe, and find themselves in Bavaria, you can guess where this story's headed. And so it does, as the two grunts find themselves behind enemy lines and stumble upon Neuschwanstein Castle, the fantasy that Ludwig brought to life and bankrupted his kingdom for. A Versailles-like hall of mirrors, a bed that drips gold, a built-in grotto: Gay heaven. To die for.

When he's going full throttle, Rudnick is like a great sketch writer, the one you want on your side at a script conference. You tell him the theme and away he goes, rattling off a hundred gags on the subject, ten of which are lousy, seventy-five of which will do, and the rest are brilliant. He doesn't know which is which, but you'll explain that to him after the show. But we don't have sketch comedy and variety shows any more, so a lot of Rudnick's sketch ideas get turned into one-act plays and the unlucky ones get turned into two-act plays. Who is King Ludwig II? He's nobody. He's not a character. He's an attitude in a funny costume. Who is James Avery, the Texan tough kid? He's nobody, either. You don't gain anything by the twin tales, because they never intersect and, even as parallel plots, they don't illuminate each other and, even if they did, neither is real enough to make the similarities matter. That's partly a conscious decision: Rudnick knows we're not interested in the minutiae of nineteenth-century court life; we like the *idea* of Mad King Ludwig, that's it. Come to that, we're not interested in Depression-era Texas, either, so why go in for a lot of superfluous historical research on that front either? It's there to kick-start the joke machine, that's all.

If there's no character, there is a theme of sorts, a meditation on the gay aesthetic, on the way a need for artistic beauty often goes hand in hand with a need for hunky male beauty. James's biggest gripe about his mom is that she has "bad hair and no taste." She raises her hand to wallop the little bugger, but he has the last word: "Fine. Hit me again. But look at your dining room."

The audience laughs. But whose voice do you hear? Everybody on stage in this play, whether they're camping around in mid-nineteenth-century Bavaria or pre-World War Two Dainesville, sounds like an early twenty-first-century urban gay. The joke of anachronism is not to be disdained: it's hard to resist making King Ludwig a camp wisecracker, and why should you? But creating a 1930s teenager as a vehicle for contemporary gay assertiveness seems far creakier. Usually, an author adopts the parallel plot form to filter the remote past through a more familiar milieu—John Updike's *Memories of the Ford Administration* alternates be-

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tween the presidency of James Buchanan and that of Gerald Ford: because the 1970s are conjured so authentically, they lend a vividness to the scenes laid in the 1850s. That doesn't happen with Rudnick. 1930s Texas is as fake a bit of set-dressing as 1850s Bavaria. And by the end Sean Dugan's freewheeling turn as James leaves Frechette's Ludwig looking comparatively tame.

That wouldn't necessarily be a defect were it not for the fact that the dining-room line and the molting line and so many others that would once have sounded so twinkly and special and off-Broadway have a generic familiarity about them—they're the sort of thing that the gay best friend says in any old Hollywood romantic comedy nowadays. And that, in the end, is the real story here, the one Rudnick can't quite account for: the connection between Ludwig and our own time, between the Bavarian court and "Will and Grace." Richard Wagner wouldn't need the patronage of Ludwig now; he'd *be* Ludwig.

Today, the guys carrying on like mad kings are the fellows who'd once have been the court musicians—Michael Jackson checking in to the Dorchester Hotel with a twelve-year-old Norwegian boy who'd won a Michael Jackson lookalike competition; Elton John taking tea on the balcony of his hotel bedroom on a breezy day and screaming at the waiter to "turn off that fucking wind," while an aide sighed, "She's lost it. She's finally lost it." And, in a kind of trickle-down queeniness, an easy-listening version of that pop-camp sensibility is all the rage in contemporary pop culture: as Huey Long might have put it, every man a mad king. Even with the obligatory male nudity, Rudnick's insistence on the specialness of the "queer eye" has a vague whiff of forlorn pleading about it. It's also undermined by Thomas Lynch's drab functional off-Broadway set: doors, columns, a wall. It's a classic breach of the Richard Rodgers rule—that in a good show the costumes look the way the orchestrations sound. In *Valhalla*, the set isn't saying what the play is (though William Ivey Long's costumes are a delight).

Perhaps that's why Rudnick's long-time director, Christopher Ashley, has just a hit-and-miss time with the scenes: some work, some don't, jokes misfire, timing goes awry. And by the time Rudnick tries to shift tone to make his Big Point neither he nor Ashley nor the cast are up to managing the transition. The finale winds up not deep and meaningful but drowning in a treacly sentimentality that undoes a lot of the fun of the ninety minutes beforehand. Stay glib, stay shallow, Mr. Rudnick: that's where you're most profound.

You appreciate that, if only with the benefit of hindsight, about ten minutes into *The Flu Season*, written by Will Eno and produced by the Rude Mechanicals Theatre Company at the Blue Heron Arts Center. The first words set the tone: "I could leave it all alone. I could let us shudder by ourselves. Leave us uncomforted by the shaky fiction of anything shared, of any common story. I could let us wreck ourselves in the dark, shiver closer to death, slowly, unnoticeably, instead of making such a big production out of it. But I won't."

You're telling me. Ostensibly, *The Flu Season* is about a doctor, a nurse, and two psychiatric patients—that's the "common story." "Write what you know" is the standard injunction at "creative writing" courses, and, while some may have waited on tables one summer or pumped gas, what most writers know is writing. Thus, whether or not he knows a thing about psychiatric institutions, Will Eno certainly knows about Will Eno, and that's his principal subject here: the writing of a play by Will Eno. So, whenever it looks as if the doctor/patient relationship might get going, the lights dim and two characters named Prologue and Epilogue step forward. As Prologue puts it, "Welcome to a play whose title is *The Snow Romance*. It is a chronicle of love and no love, of interiors and exteriors, of weather, change, entry-level psychology and time; but oh, what chronicle isn't?"

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Epilogue steps in to correct him. "Right. About the title, the play is now called *The Flu Season*," he says. "The new title stands for the fatigue, for all the sick-days wasted in coming up with a title at all. *The Flu Season*. I don't know. Could use some work."

Prologue represents the author's original impulse. Epilogue is the rewrite guy, the wiser hand who checks the romantic giddiness of the first draft. "I come later," he explains. "More coldly and with a little less optimism. I'll revise a line, add an afterthought, subtract a feeling."

The play begins in mid-conversation. "I think that would be fine," says the nurse.

"What would?" says the patient. "No one said anything. You're just going to start talking to me, totally out of the blue?" Other "characters" say things like, "Is that something like what you were looking for someone to say?" At the end, Epilogue tells us, "There was never any woman, never any nurse, nor doctor, nor certainly any man. Isn't that sad? It was a pile of words. Isn't that sad?"

Yes, it is. It's always sad when a writer can do nothing with real dilemmas except turn them into writer's dilemmas. That really is just "a pile of words."

Just as I was pining for Paul Rudnick at Will Eno's play, at the Civilians' production of *The Ladies* I began to miss Will Eno. This is a revue, of sorts, about dictatorial molls: Imelda Marcos, Elena Ceausescu, Eva Perón, and Madame Mao. You'd think there'd be enough there to get you through the evening, but the writer Anne Washburn and her director Anne Kauffman felt the need to introduce two extra characters: "Anne Washburn" (played by Jennifer R. Morris) and "Anne Kauffman" (played by Jennifer Dundas). The dialogue they speak is drawn from taped transcriptions of the two Annes discussing the play, which the two Jennifers recreate with all the hesitations and repetitions intact. So, instead of being about the four ladies, it's about the two women explaining how they put together a play about the four ladies. Along the way, they discuss the conventions of historical biodrama. Should they perhaps have a light that comes on whenever actual quotations from their subjects are used? Well, why not? So we are introduced to "The Light of History," a bulb that switches on whenever the characters speak their own words, such as Madame Mao's equation of formal wear and political dissent. If you want to see four women with a lot of blood on their hands reduced to a back-up girl group in an aimless amusement, then this is the play for you. The self-absorption of this production is even feebler than at *The Flu Season*: there, you never felt there was much of a "real play" for the tiresome postmodern authorial commentary to get in the way of. But, if Elena Ceausescu can't divert an author from narcissistic gimmickry, who can? If Paul Rudnick's limitation is that all his characters talk like him, at least he doesn't sit on stage all night and insist that the playwright's the thing.

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Dance

Stromanizing

by Laura Jacobs

It takes hours daily of blind instinctive moving and fumbling to find the revealing gesture, and the process goes on for weeks before I am ready to start composing. . . . This is the kernel, the nucleus of the dance. All the design develops from this.

—Agnes de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*

To be a dancer in America in the Thirties and Forties—the decades when Martha Graham was moving earth with her flexed foot, Eugene Loring was playing Cowboys and Indians to Copland, Antony Tudor was pulling G-force expressionism from a classicism in stays, Jerome Robbins was coining character with a jukebox genius for vernacular, and George Balanchine was taking dictation from God (lightning speed, cat-paw quiet) and a footnote from Fred Astaire (that swingy, selfless style)—to dance was a vocation. No one has written better about the calling than Agnes de Mille, herself a groundbreaking choreographer in those landmark years. De Mille's books are gems of eyewitness reporting and insight, and especially radiant are the discussions she had with Graham, a best friend and very much the big sister. Their conversations were always about the search, the struggle, the don't compromise, the divine, even if it was sometimes what Graham called "divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching . . ." Onward, Choreographic Soldiers.

"Quickening" was another Graham word, as in "a vitality, a life-force, an energy, a quickening." It too has a religious connotation, the moment, according to Aquinas, when a soul is divinely infused. Remembering the breakthrough influence that Igor Stravinsky's *Apollon Musagète* had on him, Balanchine, in the 1940s, wrote, "I began to see how I could clarify, by limiting, by reducing what seemed to be multiple possibilities to the one which is inevitable." Call it what you will—"the revealing gesture" or "the one which is inevitable"—all the design develops from this. When Antony Tudor was making his 1942 masterpiece *Pillar of Fire*, "Hagar's gestures," de Mille reports, "were chosen with prayer and fasting." Trial by fire, gesture forged in fire, Promethean fire, art. Hagar's very first movement—which is the ballet's as well—opens her to the audience like nasty gossip. She is sitting alone on the front steps of a house and slowly her right hand, flat and tense as a blade, lifts from her lap toward her temple in a slow-motion scythe-like arc, nine to twelve, and smooths her already smooth hair. She is wound tight, marking time, sick with its passing, nearly hopeless, and this slow seminal motion, the climbing flat of her hand, will grow into larger moves, will inflame in a series of bodily arcs and plunges, reaches and retreats, a tug of war between abandon and regret. And it all begins in the flat of a hand.

And then there's de Mille. One of the things I love about her work, especially her

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work on Broadway, is the way she found a heartfelt, almost reverential, stylized in-between: a plastique that took a slightly off, but simple, move or pose or gesture and graced it—poeticized it—with the pulled-up, still-point energy of classical dance. No wonder she was such a perfect fit with Rodgers and Hammerstein; they too worked reverence, songs like steeples, into their musicals. De Mille was a great synthesizer. She learned from Graham and Tudor, revered their achievements, and partook—too much some say, though I don't—of what they created. De Mille's work has its own gravity, a weighted lightness, a low plumb that's not as heavy, pitching, as Graham's, and a plastique as taut as Tudor's, but shadowless, as if the sun is always straight above. She's like milkweed; the pods are rough, brown, but the stem runs with whiteness, and the seeds fly. Look at *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *Brigadoon*—not just at the dream ballets—and you get blown away. Movement unfurls in fluttering bolts, and then it's cut for an ecstatic moment, a pose frozen like an action shot in a Forties fashion magazine. Example: Laurey's leap onto Curly's shoulder, like a doe on a cloud. You just gaze at how wonderful it is.

Is such stylization dated today? In 2001 at City Center, American Ballet Theatre's best effort was de Mille's *Rodeo*. Like a barn-raising, sprung with air, the ballet just stands up before you. And because the characters are so true, their gestures like strikes of a silver hammer, the story can tell itself through rhythm, grouping, and folk dance forms—no words necessary. It didn't hurt that in Joaquin De Luz, now a soloist at New York City Ballet, the company had an irresistible Champion Roper.

Last October at City Center, ABT revived Tudor's *Pillar of Fire*, a more difficult ballet all around, with Julie Kent, Gillian Murphy, and Amanda McKerrow having their first attempts at Hagar (the company goes at it again this spring at the Met). Even if Kent hadn't been almost five months pregnant—coyly, annoyingly, she kept tucking a hand under her queasy-making belly bump—she would have been miscast. Her Hagar was a spinster Juliet, stiff and moony and, as always with Kent in recent years, pretty at the expense of everything else. Murphy danced with more muscle, but in a cowering way, as if Hagar were a victim, the subject of abuse. She's not, she's a soul on fire, a battlefield in her breast, desperate for love but in a moment of defeat willing to take just sex. McKerrow's performance was smarter, more linear and coherent, but not deep or big enough, not enough in her eyes. *Pillar of Fire* is not just a story of small-town ingrown judgment and sublimation, it is also about the making of an artist (it made the first Hagar, Nora Kaye). You must lose yourself to transcend yourself. The music, after all, is Schoenberg's "Transfigured Night." *Pillar of Fire* is transfigured storytelling, even without a Hagar that burns bright: the shorthand is sharp, the narrative flow sure, cursive, one minute telescoped close in, the next swept off in the distance; we seem to move through a real town in real time, then suddenly the ballet is out-of-body, an erotic dream, innocence and experience dancing together, as if the town itself were dreaming of what happens at its edges in the dark. Oh, for such storytelling today. It wasn't until I saw Susan Stroman's new work for New York City Ballet that I realized how much I miss the revealing gesture, the stylized soul quickening onstage.

The Stroman ballet is the first of four works commissioned as part of NYCB's centennial celebration—the hundredth anniversary of George Balanchine's birth in 1904. It's been eleven years since the last big celebration: in 1993, NYCB honored the tenth anniversary of Balanchine's death by performing, in chronological order, seventy-three of his 425 ballets. If that undertaking was sublime in scope, this one is on the skimpy side. I don't mind that. Balanchine, who liked to build festivals around composers (Stravinsky, Ravel, Tchaikovsky), probably would have waved away his 100th with a *Who Cares?* flourish—a vodka toast and on to 101. But what would he think if

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he got this for a present: a full-length ballet by a Broadway choreographer?

Not a *pièce d'occasion*. Not a thirty-minute movement sonnet, a pure-dance project that the deep-pocket producers on 42nd Street would never get. No, Martins has given Stroman the whole stage for an entire program. Not even Jerome Robbins, the most brilliant Broadway choreographer of the last sixty years, and a resident choreographer at NYCB for many of those years, got the whole enchilada at the State Theater. Balanchine worked at full-length, but infrequently: *The Nutcracker*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Don Quixote*, *Jewels*, *Coppélia*. Peter Martins has added to that: his attractive if rather cramped *Sleeping Beauty* of 1991, his homely and stylistically inappropriate *Swan Lake* of 1999 (if you have Mr. B's take on the classic, you don't need Mr. M's). And now this, an outside effort called *Double Feature*, the title a reference to the silent movie format of Stroman's show. I can't bring myself to call it a ballet.

The rationale behind this commission, its connection to the centennial, is a glib byte. Peter Martins in *Playbill*: "In the thirties Balanchine was 'Mr. Broadway,' as was Jerome Robbins later on. Today, Susan is definitely 'Ms. Broadway,' so it seemed perfect to have her here this year to honor Mr. B's legacy as a Broadway pioneer." Never mind that the presence in rep of Balanchine's "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," his ballet from the 1936 musical *On Your Toes*, is enough for many of us (we all love "Slaughter," we do, it's lots of fun, but oh I think I'll skip out on it tonight). Never mind that you can get your Broadway Balanchine in better places, like *The Four Temperaments* (those slow-motion kick lines), *Western Symphony*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Who Cares?*, the third act of *Union Jack* (there's a lot of Shubert Alley in those third-movement curtain closers), not to mention "Rubies," a whole Broadway show in tiaras and red velvet—think Lola on the town with The Hot Box Girls. Susan Stroman is currently the most award-winning choreographer on Broadway—five Tonys for starters—and that makes her a gold-plated prize in these days of risk-averse arts marketing. A couple questions, though. Is Martins simply ignoring the fact that Stroman is also the most overrated choreography on Broadway? Or is he innocent of all that?

The great claim for Stroman is that she's a storyteller who tells the story "in dance." What I've seen of her work proves the opposite. Take away the sets, the spoken words, the projected titles, the heavy-handed visual and musical cues—take away the Broadway show around the dances—and there isn't much to differentiate her choreography in *Contact* from her choreography in *The Music Man* from her choreography in *Oklahoma!* from her choreography in *Double Feature*. Stroman travels light. She goes from project to project with two little bags: one holds her scant vocabulary of steps, the other her small number of tricks. You can get them all in *Contact*, the strange musical Stroman developed with Lincoln Center Theater, a show that wowed dum-dum theater critics and left dance critics cold. It has three acts/scenarios (perhaps they're supposed to be dream ballets), but the one where you see Stroman's vocabulary go all the way from A to B is the middle number "Did You Move?"

Described as "fantasies of a downtrodden housewife in 1950s Queens," it begins with a couple sitting down for dinner in an Italian restaurant. The husband is a brute, the wife is a ditz, but a lonely ditz, browbeaten. Increasingly furious because he can't get a roll, the husband leaves the table from time to time to get more food or to look for a roll, always admonishing his wife, "Don't talk, don't smile, don't fuckin' move." Every time he leaves the stage, his wife dances about the room—a fantasy of course—trying to make contact (the title!) with other people. Is this description getting tedious? Imagine sitting through it, especially as the word "fuck" gets thrown around louder and louder, for laughs no less.

Stroman's little bag of steps includes the following: a popped-up *développé à la seconde*

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(a high kick), various *jetés*, skips, *chassés* (a kind of sliding gallop), *pas de chat*, *pas de bourrée*, and a textbook arabesque. These steps are linked together in combinations you might find in any adult beginner class at any ballet school in the country—overemphatic, herky-jerky, the teacher keeping things big and bouncy for students not yet ready for nuance, the refinements begun at the intermediate level: finding, feeling, the psychological difference between *en dedans* and *en dehors* (inward and outward, darkness and light), learning the subtle shading of *épaulement* (that cameo intimacy of bust and head), climbing into the high altitudes of adagio—lift, hold, breathe, reach—those invisible mountain passes touched with eternity and pain. But getting back to *Contact*, why is this woman even doing ballet? A housewife in 1950s Queens would be wearing a girdle, her deportment in the real-life moments would have a bit of ballroom formality, stillness. Shouldn't her dream dancing have something of that Fifties formality? Gene Kelly romancing Leslie Caron? The silk of Cyd Charisse? Why is she hearing frantic classical music and not Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, those fireside classics? When she's felt up by a waiter under the table, it's a disconnect: is this the wife's fantasy of romance or Stroman's idea of humor? "Did You Move?" is a coarse and sophomoric piece of theater, and bad dance.

The third act of *Contact*—the "Girl in Yellow" section—is also coarse, and almost unbearably endless, but choreographically it's an improvement. Stroman is held within the bounds of swing dancing, line dancing, and must invent within a narrow, sometimes quite furrowed, range. This helps, because it forces upon her the act, in Balanchine's words, of "limiting . . . reducing what seemed to be multiple possibilities." Well, it's something. Still, the two main characters, potential lovers, are the broadest of clichés, he the isolated workaholic, she the cool beauty. They never quicken into something we can care about because they haven't one revealing gesture between them.

Here's an experiment you can do at home. Rent both the 1955 film of *Oklahoma!* (Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae; choreography by de Mille) and the 1999 revival, just released (Josefina Gabrielle and Hugh Jackman, choreography by Stroman). About fifteen minutes in you'll find the ensemble number "Everything's up to Date in Kansas City." Look at the differences. De Mille has blond Gene Nelson as Will Parker, the character just back from winning a rodeo in K.C. She's got him in cowboy boots, tight pants, and a black hat—already he's stylized, heightened like a flamenco dancer, slim as a spike. Yet how does the number begin? With Nelson in a catcher's squat, off to the side by a wood crate. So it begins quietly, Nelson planted low, then rising on stovepipe legs, walkin' that cowboy walk, singin' about what he's seen (Gas buggies! Burleycue!), then back down into that sexy squat, pants taut across his thighs, as if the dance is warming up and taking its time. You feel that—acres of time and everyone quiet in the sun, watching Will. He does a two-step in a circle, exaggerating it, but his second pass, a ragtime tap, that's more his style, a riding style from the hip down, quiet through the leg, giddyup in the heel. He keeps circling, his tapping clipped as grass, each pass more complicated, but always returning home to that crate on the side. Even when the other cowboys join in and de Mille brings the dance to a boil, double-time and breakaways—two girls, an old woman, and all these rough men—it's friendly, orderly, always within the hub, the homemade decorum and dishtowel snap, of that communal circle. Will Parker, our hayseed Apollo with the beautiful thighs, is the kernel of the dance.

Stroman, in her version, takes Will Parker out of boots, puts him in brown flats so long they almost look like clown shoes. She has him demonstrating bawdy dance-hall moves, among them her favorite funny step, the recurring Stroman Squat: second-position *plié* on tip-toe, done fast and goosey (it's totally wrong for a cowboy, even a chorus-boy cowboy). Stroman stages "Kan-

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sas City" as a loud rowdy number, a free-for-all. There's no communal center, no developing design, no feeling of land, or love for Will (this one's so charmless he's almost a clod), just one stunt after another—rope tricks, back flips, split jumps, wham bam thank you ma'am. Stroman doesn't grow a dance, she Stromanizes the stage, empties her bags of bombast on the music. When it's over you're flattened.

Double Feature is prefab theater, smooth on the surface, no foundation down below. It consists of two acts—a melodrama called "The Blue Necklace" and a comic romp called "Makin' Whoopee!"—which tell their stories through the conventions of silent movies, i.e. projected dialogue, lots of props, and the implied lyrics of the popular songs that make up both scores. Ballets aren't supposed to need so many words, or any words at all—the whole point is that they communicate what words cannot. But Stroman the storyteller needs words, and thus the inter-title projections are lengthy and continual. You spend as much time reading as watching, and this is a cheat. Why grow a dance from the flat of your hand when you can have thoughts thrown on a screen above your head? Adding to the conceptual confusion (for me anyway), when the movie-theater scrim lifts on "The Blue Necklace," we see a kick-line of chorus girls on pointe at "Valentine's Variety Theatre." So it's a ballet that's a silent movie about a vaudeville dancer who becomes a movie star. "They're chorines," a friend said wonderingly, "but they're in tutus?" The whole dimensional question is wonky-making, and Stroman might have played with it (as Paul Taylor did in his film noir treatment of *Le Sacre du printemps*), finding a focus by trying to answer the question. But she doesn't. As usual, she just empties her two bags—steps and schtick—in the little bit of stage in front of the sets. It's all foreground, but then again, Stroman's work is all foreground.

"The Blue Necklace" is a weepy that turns into a Cinderella story: an aspiring actress (or is she a dancer?) leaves her illegitimate baby girl and a blue necklace on a church step, the child's adopted by a man whose wife is the archetypal wicked stepmother, the actress becomes a star and wants to find her daughter, who grows up, goes to an orphans' ball sponsored by the actress mother, proves her DNA by dancing well, and blah-blah-blah happy ending. The score is Irving Berlin hits arranged by Glen Kelly, nicely done but way too long. Doug Besterman's orchestrations are accomplished, yet from the very first notes you hear a pushy, almost presumptuous tonal appropriation of Hershy Kay's *Who Cares?* Riding coattails, nostalgia by numbers, whatever. It's too much and too easy. Robin Wagner's scenery is precise, the source of the show's sleek feel.

As for Stroman, her work with a classical vocabulary is not worthy of this stage. She keeps the dancers moving, keeps going and going, trying to coin a phrase, find a flow, a momentum, a meaning. I think that's why every solo and duet goes on too long, with louder repeats: she knows the steps aren't moving the story. At the orphans' ball, watching the belaboring of Berlin's "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing," all I could think of was the 1954 film *White Christmas*. Rent it and see what Robert Alton, a real Broadway choreographer, did with Danny Kaye, Vera-Ellen, a dock outside a dinner club, and that song. Talk about phrase and flow. Stroman does well with "Mandy," using it to introduce the matinée idol danced by Damian Woetzel. The dance is light, rhythmically acute, made with skips, and it suggests a personality, a man who skips through life and is quick to shine. It's a narrowing-in that opens out.

Stroman makes a lot of references to older ballets, shows, choreographers. You could call her (and some do) Ms. Pastiche. Why hasn't she learned what goes into the crafting of these classics? Watching her Stromanize "Marian the Librarian" in the revival of *The Music Man*, I felt like yelling, "Grab a dictionary and look under S for stylized, subconscious, subtext, or symbol." In the famous essay quoted earlier, Balan-

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chine writes that he came "to understand how gestures, like tones in music and shades in painting, have certain family relations. As groups they impose their own laws." In "The Blue Necklace," Stroman should have shown us the "family relation" between mother and daughter, not from the outside with subtitles and cues, but from the inside, kinetically, with something they share like a genetic code—the inevitable step, a revealing gesture.

Indeed, one of Stroman's most dependable tricks is kinetic. It's not so much a one-two effect as a twofer, a split second in which two things happen at once. *Contact*: husband drops his plate on the table/wife whips a napkin off her head; *Oklahoma!*: trunk glides in out of nowhere/Will Parker lands on it just as it stops. These twofers are percussive punctuation, like exclamation marks, and good for making nothing happening seem like something happening; in short, good for Stromanizing. Sometimes, though, the exclamation speaks. In "The Blue Necklace," the adopted daughter dances around the living room she's supposed to be cleaning, and every time the mean mother bursts in/the daughter falls to the floor pretending to scrub. It's a funny bit, explosive in the right way, and oddly touching, because we begin to see character shown not told.

"Makin' Whoopee!," using the songs of Walter Donaldson, is based on *Seven Chances*, a Buster Keaton movie about a young man who will inherit millions if he can marry by 7:00 that night. I can just hear Stroman selling it to Martins, something like "the chase scenes, all those girls in bridal gowns, it's the Wilis in *Giselle*." If only this piece had been half as long as it is, a two-reeler, so that Stroman could have concentrated her slim resources on the slim story. Alexandra Ansanelli and Tom Gold are wonderfully cast, a little wedding-cake couple, and Gold especially has a triumph as the unblinking Buster Keaton, a yearning romantic trapped in the black cloud of his dark suit, his body always a beat behind his heart. But again, Stroman pads it out. The pas de deux in the park, where the Keaton character proposes to various females, are tiresome. The dances for Gold and his two business partners, a real Broadway trio, should be wittier, more inventive, with more of those twofers. They never quite click in. And why does Stroman have Gold, who's clearly worked hard to get the Keaton plastique, suddenly toodling around like Chaplin's Little Tramp? ("'Cause she always throws in the kitchen sink," said a theater queen I know.) The climactic chase is a *coup de théâtre*. The stage is clear and a mass of brides-to-be pound after Gold in long thick diagonals. It's always fun to watch people run, really run, onstage. Some of the brides are guys in drag, and when one of them falls down under a strobe effect it gets a huge laugh. A little dog, a Boston Terrier, gets an even bigger laugh. Leaving the theater I thought, wouldn't it be great to have a Boston Terrier?

In recent years I've chanced to ask friends in the theater why Stroman is so dominant on Broadway when the work is so undistinguished. I always get the same answer. To wit: She's easy to work with, a team player, she doesn't storm the director with demands, she's nice. Suddenly the baseball hat makes sense—the black baseball hat, one of the boys, that is Stroman's signature accessory. In other words, she's not a Beelzebub like Robbins, purgatory on two legs (but his shows are shot with heat and light). She's not a pain in the ass like de Mille, famous for her tantrums, those Biblical floods of tears (but the dances are icons of American history). And she's not a Graham, who broke rule after rule in her quest never to lie, the first rule broken, according to de Mille, "that of being a good egg—one of the gang."

Dance is not a gang or a team. It is a vocation. You must lose yourself to transcend yourself. Susan Stroman, Ms. Broadway, has five Tonys and counting. What she doesn't have is a moment of truth.

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Art

Sea changes

by Karen Wilkin

In December 1848, shortly before his seventeenth birthday, Edouard Manet left France on a merchant vessel sailing to Rio de Janeiro and back; the voyage lasted almost four months. Earlier that year, he had failed the entrance examination for naval officers' school and the trip was a kind of remedial course, designed to prepare unsuccessful young applicants to the French Naval Academy for a second—final—try at the exam. Manet's letters home suggest that he loved being at sea, but, despite the intensive onboard cramming, he failed the exam again, definitively ending his chance of a naval career, no doubt to his haute bourgeoise family's despair. We know the rest.

Or do we? Manet was so inventive, so daring, so restless a painter that there always seems something new to discover about him. Over the past few years, our ideas have been enlarged by exhibitions focusing—narrowly—on his still lifes and—broadly—on his complex conversation with the tradition of Spanish painting. Another well-conceived and well-realized show, "Manet and the Sea"—which originated at the Art Institute of Chicago and is now on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art—further enriches our sense of this modern giant's achievement by concentrating on the modest but remarkably significant 10 percent of his oeuvre dealing with marine motifs.[1] It's a fascinating exhibition that assembles an often surprising selection of works, some of them rarely seen, all of them corresponding to the broadest possible interpretation of the theme—not only images of harbors, beaches, and boats, but also views of the sea through the window, the tidal mouths of rivers (but not, the curators tell us, upstream scenes), and the canals of Venice, presumably because of the salinity of the water. Including Venice is not too much of a stretch, especially since it justifies the presence of a terrific picture; the presence of that celebrated still life of a fish from the Art Institute of Chicago is harder to explain. A handful of fine preparatory studies and a delicious little notebook full of on-the-spot, rapid watercolors season the mix. Viewers may turn the pages of the notebook—virtually, at least—through an interactive video program in a nearby gallery.

In the simplest terms, "Manet and the Sea" can be savored simply as a wonderful group of Manets. From a more scholarly point of view, it can be enjoyed as an opportunity to consider together related pictures that are now in widely separated collections. The show centers on the Philadelphia Museum of Art's great treasure, *The Battle of the U.S.S. "Kearsarge" and the C.S.S. "Alabama"* (1864). This *tour de force* of malachite green water and roiling gray smoke, punctuated by knife-edged black

1 "Manet and the Sea" opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on February 15 and remains on view through May 31, 2004. The exhibition was previously on view at the Art Institute of Chicago from October 20, 2003 to January 19, 2004.

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hulls, was the thirty-two-year-old Manet's first seascape, inspired by newspaper accounts and images of a celebrated Civil War naval battle, which took place, improbably, in the Channel. (Something to do with blockades.) In Philadelphia, the picture is installed where we can easily compare it to the Metropolitan Museum's more tranquil but equally tough image of the sleek black "Kearsarge" at rest, played off of the swelling curves of a brown-sailed fishing boat. Painted the same year as the imagined battle scene, after Manet saw the victorious steamship anchored off Boulogne, the Met's picture is like a distorted mirror image of the Philadelphia painting. The two share a sharply angled view of the nominal "subject" of the picture, a composition notably at odds with traditional marine paintings, but each has a highly distinctive mood and temperature, the result of subtle differences in color, deployment of shapes, and orchestration of densities. Nearby, the Art Institute of Chicago's coloristically and compositionally related *Steamboat Leaving Boulogne*, also painted in 1864, announces still other possibilities; a near-abstraction of relentlessly flat planes of water and sky—blue against pale gray—a scattering of bold, sooty gray arcs of silhouetted sails, and a scribble of smoke, it seems to make Milton Avery's late work inevitable.

The show includes the Philadelphia Museum's peculiar canvas *The Steamboat, Seascape with Porpoises* (1868), almost identical in palette to the "Kearsarge" pictures, but oddly awkward in composition. The relationship of the edge of the picture to the horizontal yards of the square-rigged sailing ship is both uncomfortable and infelicitous. And then there is that strange subtext implied by the combination of the school of porpoises, an image with idyllic, classical overtones, with the "traditional" sailboats and a modern steamship spewing smoke. Smaller, related pictures, including some notebook drawings and watercolors, from other far-flung sources, help us to track Manet's probing of the permutations of the sea as a motif, a theme both new to him and evidently provocative.

Similar groupings document Manet's explorations of seaside and seascape motifs during the two decades after he painted the "Kearsarge" pictures—born in 1832, he died, at fifty-one, in 1883. The sequence allows, even encourages, us to approach the show as an exploration of the painter's evolution, yet "Manet and the Sea" has broader ambitions. It not only examines Manet's originality and audacity as a painter of seascapes, but also widens the inquiry by connecting his sea paintings to those of his colleagues and near-contemporaries. Manet is what the curators call "the backbone" of the show; his work is flanked by a series of miniature monographic exhibitions of sea pictures by Gustave Courbet, James A. M. Whistler, Eugène Boudin, Johan Barthold Jongkind, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. The installation's sightlines cross-reference thematically related pictures, forcing us to ruminate on friendships, aesthetic connections, and the artists' general awareness of each other's work, with interesting effect. Unlikely as the friendship between Courbet and Whistler may seem, for example, given the differences in what we know of their temperaments and the obvious differences in their work, the proximity of an atypically translucent, close-valued Courbet of waterspouts to a group of exquisitely subtle Whistler seascapes not only reminds us that the two painted together at the beach, but also makes it seem possible that they had something useful and of mutual benefit to talk about.

All of this is set in context by a capsule history of influential marine painting—a handful of Dutch seascapes of the seventeenth century and some "official" nineteenth-century French paintings of sea battles—defining the conventions for the genre before Manet and his colleagues began to disrupt them and, ultimately, make them irrelevant. In the Dutch paintings, ships are emblems of profitable commerce, while in the French pictures heroic acts are the subject. In both, the sea is a neutral backdrop; it

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seems nearly coincidental that whatever was depicted occurred in the presence of seawater. A couple of small but muscular canvases by Eugène Delacroix signal the beginning of what it is almost irresistible not to call a sea change: the expression of heightened sensibility that we call "Romanticism." In Delacroix's powerful pictures, neither the pale tossing surf in a painting of a shipwreck nor the turbulent green waves of a stormy Sea of Galilee can be relegated to the role of background. Agitated, threatening, unstable water becomes a mirror of emotion, an equivalent for human feeling and drama. It was a fresh and arresting idea, early on, although by the mid-nineteenth century, it, too, had become a convention of marine views. Yet the Romantic shift of emphasis to the sea itself, as metaphor, prepared the way for Manet and his colleagues to turn their attention on the sea as spectacle—to treat expanses of water and the sea coast as visual phenomena, subjects of contemplation, and triggers for meditation.

How stimulating Manet himself found the most minimal, elegant contrasts of sails, boats, and the plane of the sea is eloquently demonstrated by a trio of astonishing small pictures that he painted between 1868 and 1873. Each distills, in a slightly different way, the cool, moist air and diffused light of overcast days on the Northern coasts of France into pure painting. The big divisions of beach, water, and sky are accounted for with broad washes of translucent gray, sometimes flushed with ochre, sometimes tinged with green. Sails and hulls become schematic shapes, loosely disposed across a surface that becomes a metaphor for the unstable surface of the sea. Details of masts and rigging are sometimes itemized with fluent drawing, reminding us of the specialized knowledge Manet acquired, albeit imperfectly, on that training voyage. Still, pictorial imperatives could make him jettison mere accuracy without regret; witness a little jewel from the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, in which clouds, waves, wind, and rigging alike are reduced to delicate, nervous brushstrokes. Or another little masterpiece, from a private collection, that sets a pair of dark sails and a single light sail against a minimally inflected, washy ground with a bare hint of horizon. Add two strokes for hulls. Next stop, abstraction.

That the most apparently uneventful aspects of the seashore were powerful stimuli for pictorial invention is also visible, throughout the show, in stripped down, arresting paintings by Manet's colleagues—a dazzling 1869 Courbet of a terrifying black-green wave under a swirling purple-brown sky or a glittering 1864 Monet of Honfleur, all flecked clouds and dancing wavelets, to name only two examples. Pictures such as these make it tempting to assume that the elemental divisions of sea and sky, along with the spatial dislocations of the shapes of sails, were essential to modernist painting's gradual elimination of everything not intrinsic to the discipline, including illusionism and narrative, as Clement Greenberg formulated it. But "modernist painting" is not interchangeable with "abstract painting," and timeless, even prescient, as some of Manet's and his colleagues' most simplified sea pictures are, there are other, equally compelling works in the show that remind us that modernism was not only a question of formal innovations. (Even in formal terms, it is clear that for Manet and his near-contemporaries, multiplicity could be as effective a spur as extreme simplicity in challenging conventions; witness the Impressionists' packed boulevard scenes or the landscape images that can seem to anticipate all-over abstraction.)

Manet himself was a sophisticated, worldly Parisian, not only the quintessential "painter of modern life," but an active participant in it. In his day, the seaside, newly accessible by railway, was becoming a new destination for leisure-seekers and those experimenting with the new-fangled idea of sea-bathing for curative purposes. New resorts were constructed; exclusive beach clubs—*sociétés des bains*—were formed. That Manet, too, went to the seaside for family vacations is documented by small, charming

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pictures cobbled together from notebook studies of people like himself and his family members strolling on the beach. They are both intensely evocative of a particular moment in their sharply observed details of dress and posture, and radical in their spatial syncopations. A curious little painting of women in bathing suits on the beach, one reclining, one revealing a bit of thigh as she wrings out the hem of her daringly short skirt, is like an unsentimental, formally rigorous *September Morn*. An economically composed painting of Manet's wife and brother seated at the water's edge, a paradoxical miracle of terse abstract construction and telling, fiercely reduced detail, bears witness to the painter's ventures out of the studio to work *en plein air*; grains of sand embedded in the paint attest to a persistent wind. (So do Suzanne Manet's tightly tied veil and securely anchored hat.)

That Manet's colleagues also painted at the beach on family holidays is documented by a group of light-struck, apparently improvisational pictures by his sister-in-law, Berthe Morisot, painted on the Isle of Wight. The point is most clearly reinforced, however, by a delightful 1870 Monet of his wife, seated on the beach, sheltering under a parasol; painted during the artist's honeymoon in Trouville, the little picture also bears witness to Monet's faultless eye for tone, his ability to evoke specific qualities of light with non-literal color, and his marvelous touch. Like Manet's picture of *his* wife at the beach, the Monet was painted *en plein air*; there is visible sand in the surface of this painting, too. (Manet's relationship to the whiz-kid Monet is a kind of subtext of the show, which makes it clear how much the younger artist learned from the older; Manet apparently resented it at first, although the two men later became friends, linked perhaps by their common desire to "make it modern.")

Modernity is the subject, too, of Manet's crowded harbor scenes, paeans to up-to-date transport, announced as energetic flicks of the brush. The most unforgettable though, may be his least mechanized: a superb, deadpan, extraordinarily complex "portrait" of the twin jetties at Boulogne. Pilings and railings are translated into repetitive strokes that stretch edge to edge across the canvas, making us read broad bands of green and gray, above and below, as sea and sky. The mast of a sailboat slipping between the jetties challenges these insistent horizontals, its rapid vertical drawing and delicately traced rigging at once carving out space between the parallel, overlapped jetties and marking the surface of the canvas; the loosely rendered sails of three boats strengthen the argument.

The last years of Manet's too-brief career are accounted for by an unfinished but no less powerful canvas, probably intended for the Salon of 1881, and a study for it. Inspired, like the first "Kearsarge" painting, by newspaper accounts, both the small and large versions of *The Escape of Rochefort* (both 1880–1881, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and Kunsthaus Zurich, respectively) imaginatively envision the escape of a well-known political prisoner from New Caledonia. Both the large, rough-hewn canvas and the smaller study reprise the tipped expanse of blue-green and the high horizon of Manet's first sea pictures, but we are brought much closer, not only to the ostensible subjects—the escaping men in their rowboat—but also to the surface of the water itself. Especially in the unfinished large painting, Rochefort and his fellow escapees are rendered fairly schematically. The water, however, is an explosion of ferocious, emphatic brushstrokes, all wrist, arm, and excitement about how pigment feels under the hand.

"Manet and the Sea" is obviously an exhibition rooted in sound, exhaustive art historical research, but it is also a show driven by visual connections and by the sheer pleasure of bringing together pictures that ravish the eye at the same time that they stimulate the intellect. It reminds us of how artists really function: that particular desiderata are common to like-minded painters at particular times, that even the most assured, self-sufficient artists pay attention to what their colleagues are doing,

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and more. The installation underscores these ideas by providing unexpected long views, although how well this will work when the galleries are crowded with visitors attracted by the promise of yet another Impressionist show is another matter. The handsome catalogue's essays, by a variety of experts on the period including the exhibition's co-curator, the Manet scholar Juliet Wilson-Bareau, provide a great deal of fascinating, usually readable information. Wilson-Bareau's prose is, to put it delicately, plodding, but the depth of her knowledge of Manet is astonishing and she is generous in sharing illuminating details. Together, "Manet and the Sea" and its interesting catalogue shed new light on this apparently inexhaustible subject. I feel certain there is more to come. We can look forward to "Manet and What?" next.

Exhibition note

"A Beautiful and Gracious Manner: The Art of Parmigianino" at The Frick Collection, New York. January 27, 2004–April 18, 2004

Is some Parmigianino better than no Parmigianino? That is the question.

It seems only yesterday that this artist formerly known as Mannerist received major museum treatment. In art years, it almost *was* yesterday: the landmark "Correggio & Parmigianino: Master Draughtsmen of the Renaissance" traveled between The British Museum, London, and the Metropolitan Museum, New York, in 2000 and 2001. The catalogue of this exhibition, with an essay by Carmen C. Bambach on Parmigianino, is still a must read for any good understanding of the relationship between the two great early-sixteenth-century talents of Parma—sometimes rivals and sometimes mentor (Correggio) and pupil (Parmigianino).

While the current show, an import from the National Gallery of Canada, lacks the rigor and thoroughness of the 2000–2001 exhibition, one may say that it never promises anything more (a tiny attempt at matching drawing to painting goes nowhere). Here is a "celebration" on the quincentennial of the artist's birth, regardless of how one might feel about the term "celebration" as an odious appropriation from the publicity industry. And while collections like the Pierpont Morgan Library opted out of lending top work in 2004 as they did in 2000/2001, there can still be lemonade in the lemons of a hit and miss show. Although I have yet to encounter a museum that admits to exhibiting so-so examples of an artist's work—after all, who would lend to such a thing?—it is difficult not to see the wide range of quality and importance in the fifty-odd drawings, the seven paintings, and the dozen prints here assembled. But perhaps it is also our modern tastes that prevent us from digesting the oil *Adoration of the Shepherds* (*c.* 1522) while we can delight in the red chalk *Sleeping Man* (*c.* 1527–1530).

Parmigianino (1503–1540) produced over a thousand extant drawings and prints in addition to his paintings and frescos. He lead a tumultuous and prolific artistic life in the shadow of what might be called the greatest generation of the Italian Renaissance. His style developed first under the Emilian influence of Correggio, then by studying the work of Michelangelo and Raphael in Rome (Vasari famously maintained that "it was said that the spirit of Raphael had passed into Parmigianino's body"). An intense period of productivity under the Medici pope Clement VII starting in 1524 was cut short in 1527 by Charles V's sack of Rome and the artist's narrow escape to Bologna. Returning to Parma in 1530, Parmigianino undertook his *Madonna of the Long Neck*, a five-year labor and his most famous "Mannerist" altarpiece, in 1534 (a few of his fifty studies for *Long Neck* are here on display); he died, before its completion, at age thirty-seven in Casalmaggiore.

It may be true that Parmigianino is ripe for exhibiting now or anytime. This worthwhile but far from perfect show makes the case.

—*James Panero*

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

As I've noted before in these pages—regrettably too many times—this is an excellent age for singing. As I have also noted, it is a less excellent age for tenors in particular. Sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, baritones, basses—we have a thousand of them. We are even loaded with countertenors, a species barely thought of ten years ago. Contraltos, it is true, are a bit thin on the ground: but with Ewa Podleś, you don't need too many others.

Still, tenors could be more abundant. Plácido Domingo can't go on forever, although sometimes—indeed, almost every time he sings—he makes you think otherwise. But I am slowly getting to my point: We are not without tenors altogether, and in fact we have some first-rate ones. It so happened that three of them appeared at the Metropolitan Opera in short succession—four, if you count Domingo, which we should.

Roberto Alagna is seldom given his due, probably because he is one half of "The Love Couple," a pair whom critics and other journalists love to mock. (The other half is his wife, the soprano Angela Gheorghiu.) Alagna has made a big career for himself, and he deserves one. In certain roles, he is hardly equaled (I mean, by his peers today). I think of his Faust, and also of his Nemorino. An *Elixir of Love* at the Met—starring both Alagnas—is a highlight of my memory. It had skill, flair, and musicality. These are not just personalities, Mr. and Mrs. A. (although what's wrong with a little personality in the opera?). These are formidable singers.

And Alagna was indeed formidable in a recent Met *Werther*. This Massenet opera can be a sleepy and not quite convincing affair, but it was alive and engrossing on this occasion. This was chiefly thanks to the performance of Alagna in the title role. The voice was radiant. It was lyrical, powerful, secure. When he's on form, he sings with extraordinary freedom. He might as well be strolling in the park. There is nothing uptight about him. And he takes pleasure in his singing, as well he might. His pleasure allows others to experience it, too.

I will note a few particulars: In this *Werther*, Alagna's technique was such that he could do what he wished with dynamics. This is outside a singer's control, if he does not have a handle on his technique. And Alagna showed an uncanny ability to sing sustained notes evenly—that is, he allowed no dipping of tone, no wavering of any kind. And even when his voice was on fire, it retained its creamy loveliness. Fire and cream: not a bad combination, especially for a tenor, especially for a tenor in a French role.

And you can attend *Werther*s for many a moon and not hear a more effective "Pourquoi me réveiller" (the hit aria of the opera, and one of the hit arias in all of opera).

More? Alagna proved that he is not merely a good-enough-for-opera actor. He

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died a death that most any actor would be proud of (if I may). Indeed, he rather gave the Met audience a fright.

My second tenor is Juan Diego Flórez, being touted as the King of Bel Canto. It is not just hype: This is one of the best bel canto tenors—certainly *tenori di grazia*—we have ever had. He is considered the successor to the late Alfredo Kraus, but I hazard to say that he is an improvement on Kraus. No living—or, better, active—singer is supposed to be preferred to a non-active (e.g., deceased) one. It's just not fittin'. Besides which, comparison is overdone in criticism. But in my judgment Flórez has at least as much technique as Kraus (who had plenty) and a much—an infinitely—more beautiful instrument.

This instrument and all that technique were on display in a Met *Barber of Seville*. A thrilling *Barber* it was. Flórez creates excitement when he is onstage, because you don't know what he's going to do next. Or rather, you do: You know that he's going to execute the most difficult passages with astounding ease and accuracy. But it's a kick to see him do so. Governing it all is a natural musicality that only enhances what that freakish vocal apparatus can do. *Tenore di grazia* is rather too dainty a term for Flórez: He is a pyrotechnician of the bel canto tenor voice, and a jewel in the crown of the opera world today.

The third tenor is Frank Lopardo, who gets less press than the other two. In fact, he might be dismissed as a journeyman—except that he can light up a house with excellent singing. He had a fabulous outing in a Met *Rigoletto* one night. The tenor role, the Duke of Mantua, requires exceptional skill and stamina, and Lopardo was up to all challenges.

Among his qualities were lyricism, nimbleness, and what you might call vocal "pow." In the first of his three big arias—"Questa o quella"—Lopardo was a little dark. Or if "dark" is not the right word, then "burnished." This aria likes a trumpet, and Lopardo had more of a cornet. Also, it lacked a certain bounce (which was at least as much the fault of the conductor, Marco Armiliato). But "Questa o quella" was certainly respectably rendered.

Really impressive was Lopardo's singing in the love duet with Gilda (portrayed by the Hungarian Andrea Rost). He was graceful in cavatina and smoothly deft in passagework. And his singing of the second big aria—"Parmi veder le lagrime"—was exemplary. He was surefooted and elegant, under no strain whatever.

The final big aria, of course, is one of the best-known arias in opera: "La donna è mobile." From this tenor, it was a bit more subtle than it usually is. Less of an organ grinder's tune. And Frank Lopardo had shown himself to be far more than a journeyman. A house doesn't have to settle for him—it should be proud to have him.

Plácido Domingo? He showed up at the Met for Ghermann in *The Queen of Spades*. This is one of his best roles, Russian though it is, and it is especially good for him now, because it's low-lying. But shame on me: I should make no allowances for Domingo, who has just turned sixty-three. He is singing resplendently, with the top notes ringing, the middle ones solid, and the lower ones juicy. He was a thoroughly commanding Ghermann, not just holding his own with the younger folk around him, but surpassing them. The rest of us make a big deal of Domingo's longevity. A key to his success, I suspect, is that he does not. He doesn't know how old he is, or doesn't hold it against himself: He just wakes up and sings (and works like a dog, to be sure).

I should mention some other singers in the above-cited operas. Portraying Charlotte in *Werther* was Vesselina Kasarova, the Bulgarian mezzo sensation. Hers is a dark, dark voice for Charlotte, and for the French rep generally. But she did some welcome things with that voice. For instance, she projected startling power, and for once Act III had real blood. It wasn't merely pretty.

In *The Barber of Seville*, Dwayne Croft was superb, carrying out the title role with assurance and style. Because he is so consis-

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tent, his worth can be overlooked. He now has Figaro in his bones, and he makes the part fun without over-hamming, and his technique is truly Rossinian. (He did not look clumsy next to Juan Diego Flórez.) Theodora Hanslowe made a smashing Rosina, Paata Burchuladze made an amusing—if slightly lugubrious—Don Basilio, and Jennifer Check, a young soprano, on this occasion singing Berta, remains one to keep an eye on.

In *Rigoletto*, Juan Pons was stalwart—as the hunchback, of course—and the aforementioned Miss Rost was a pleasing Gilda: capable and persuasive.

And in *The Queen of Spades*, Katarina Dalayman, a Swedish soprano, absolutely slew the part of Lisa, singing beautifully, dramatically, and excitingly. Also slaying her part was Felicity Palmer, as the Countess (this was a season after her awesome portrayal of Madame de Croissy in *Les Dialogues des Carmélites*). Also slaying her part—pardon the theme—was Elena Zaremba, as Pauline. Pauline can be a nothing role, but it jumped from this mezzo, whose ultra-Slavic instrument is hard to ignore.

Finally, amid all these singers, I should make a conductor note: Michel Plasson, the veteran French maestro, was supposed to lead that *Werther*. But in his place came a French-Canadian, Jacques Lacombe, who made one of the most successful Met debuts in recent memory. He had full control of that orchestra, and full control of the score, lending it intelligence and vibrancy. Nothing was frivolous or insipid about the music. It was the kind of performance that gives you a new appreciation of the work in question, so, hats off.

Oh, and I should really say a last word about tenors (back to them). The first of those *Werther* performances was dedicated to Franco Corelli, who had just died. And it was widely lamented that tenors had simply vanished with the wind. But Corelli was roundly criticized in his time, just as Roberto Alagna, come to think of it, is now. It is only human—and hardly detestable—to exalt the dead (or retired). But it should be possible to do so without (stupidly) slighting the living, and active.

Visiting Avery Fisher Hall were the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, under the great Sir Colin Davis. The highlight of their stay was a concert performance of *Peter Grimes*, Britten's opera from 1945. This opera works well in concert, as the music contains all the drama necessary.

Sir Colin knows that drama, and he knows that music. Nearing eighty, he is more masterly than ever. He had every turn of the tale, and every shift of the sea, in his baton—and the orchestra and chorus responded magnificently. A listener's attention could not wander. And I should note that the LSO made a warm and glowing sound, when it wanted to—in a hall alleged to be inhospitable to such sounds. Let the New York Philharmonic—and other bands—be shorn of their excuses!

A very fine cast was headed by Glenn Winslade, the Australian tenor in the title role. He was sweet but forceful in voice. It's hard not to strain in this part, but Winslade did a minimum of it. And he clearly understood the character of Grimes. The bewildered honesty in the opera's opening scene, for example, was deeply affecting.

Completely winning as Ellen Orford was the British soprano Janice Watson. Ellen is a good woman with a spine of steel—and Watson sang that way. She was clear, unquavering, and nearly heartbreaking.

Almost stealing the show—if Sir Colin hadn't been there, she might have—was the American mezzo singing Auntie, good old Jill Grove. She was imperious, smoking, electric. Grove has an outstanding instrument, coupled with outstanding musical and theatrical sense. She had you straight in your chair, whenever she opened her mouth.

The British bass James Rutherford was Swallow, providing a burnished sound, and clear diction, and solid intonation. He was daunting in his inquisition of Grimes. Jonathan Lemalu—described in his bio as a "New Zealand-born Samoan"—was rich-

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voiced and wide-ranged as Hobson. And Anthony Michaels-Moore made an alert Balstrode.

The London Symphony Chorus was an imposing actor in this drama, singing with sincere emotion, in addition to musical and technical polish. Like the orchestra, they did all that Britten required of them, which was much. One example: In their expression of a mob mentality, they were alarming.

All told, this *Grimes* was a tour de force on the part of many, and will surely be remembered as a high point of the 2003–2004 season.

Not a high point—but still creditable—was the *Boris Godunov* that the Metropolitan presented. Serving as conductor was Semyon Bychkov, who was competent, as usual. He understands that *Boris Godunov*—that quintessential Russian grand opera—is not all grand: It has moments—stretches, actually—of tenderness, intimacy, and other things. But those are part of grandeur, in a way.

In the Prologue and Act I, especially, the orchestra was not together, and Bychkov was not a good coordinator between pit and stage. That lack of coordination (obviously) robbed the opera of some of its effectiveness. So too, much of this *Boris* was oddly subdued. The conductor might have made more of the score, exploited it with more relish. But a subdued *Boris*, probably, is better than a histrionic one.

It would have been hard to ask anything more of James Morris, who sang the title role. In the last few seasons, he has proven a great Hans Sachs, and now a great Boris. On the night I heard him, he displayed extraordinary vocal beauty. Indeed, I believe he has experienced a kind of vocal renaissance of late—that is, in these last few seasons. Dramatically, he gave to Boris all he should have. When he was fatherly, I could not help thinking of Morris's Wotan. I'm sure I was *not* alone. Morris, in the Mussorgsky role, embodied rage, guilt, confusion, virtue . . .

A great bass, whatever his nationality, ought to essay Boris Godunov, and Morris has done so triumphantly.

The Latvian tenor Sergej Larin sang Grigory, or the Pretender Dimitri, freshly and stirringly. Irina Mishura was Marina, bringing her big, bold mezzo to a juicy role. She is a solid singer, in whatever she tries. Speaking of solidity, Sergei Leiferkus was present, unbudgeable as always, reflecting his excellent training, filling the house beautifully. As Rangoni, he was the picture of clerical manipulation and corruption.

Lyubov Petrova sang Xenia, showing off her quicksilver soprano. (She had been Sophie in *Werther*, by the way—a bit forward and bright, but fine.) The reliable Jeffrey Wells did a nice turn as the Police Officer, and Jane Shaulis—savvy veteran—filled the bill as the Nurse.

Laudable in the poignant role of the Simpleton was Charles Reid. This man, far from a household name, owns a gorgeous tenor, not bad for a simpleton.

And this *Boris* wasn't bad either, except that it was strange to leave the opera house, having heard that work—with a historic bass in the title role—and be so dissatisfied. Once again we see the supreme importance of leadership in the pit, singers be damned (so to speak).

On January 16, Marilyn Horne turned seventy, and the foundation she established—the Marilyn Horne Foundation—turned ten. All concerned celebrated with a five-day festival at Carnegie Hall. The festival included recitals, master classes, seminars, and a big gala concert. Sadly, all this was marred by the sudden death of Robert Harth, the executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall. As Horne remarked, "he was just hitting his stride." This is a bitter loss.

Those master classes were three in number, taught by the soprano Deborah Voigt, the baritone Thomas Hampson, and Horne herself. Each of the classes was first-rate, and in the space remaining, I will concentrate on Hampson's.

He is known as an especially thoughtful and perceptive singer, and that reputation is

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justified. He is a memorable teacher, acknowledging that the enterprise is tantamount to warfare—"semantic warfare," in which you search for the word or words that will allow a certain concept to click in a student's head. (I have remarked on the similarities between singing and golf many, many times, and will spare you my ten-hour lecture on the subject.)

Hampson did some philosophizing, as you might expect. But he was laden with practical advice as well, tips for the student in the here and now. There wasn't a student who didn't improve conspicuously under his guidance. He doctored them, they got well—or better.

And Hampson was touchingly sympathetic with those students. Perhaps it was empathy. "They are in a tender, vulnerable position," and one must be "incredibly brave" to assume it: "It's like taking a shower in a glass cage." The material at hand was by one composer—Mahler. As Hampson put it, his songs are not so much songs as "audible moments of life." You call on your experience and understanding to "ignite" a song.

Some nitty-gritty: He told the first student, "When you feel like leaning forward, stand back." In fact, "Stand back" was a theme of this class. And "stop nodding," for heaven's sake! Hampson noted that anchormen on television are always nodding, emphasizing their points. He corrected one student: "Pure Tom Brokaw." He said to another, "Don't do that! Can you stop? It not only looks bad, it's bad for you from a physical and vocal point of view."

Throughout the two hours or so, he dropped any number of pearls: "Nothing in singing is horizontal, it's all vertical." "Don't lecture at an audience; just sing the song." And "never try to sell a song! Just let it be." "Taking a breath is not like gassing up a car: You gas up, you drive as far as you can go, then you refuel. No." And "imagination is the most important part of singing. There have been great singers with mediocre voices who nonetheless had imagination. It has always been that way, and always will be."

Thomas Hampson is an intellectual, yes, but he's lavishly personable, and fall-down hilarious. His imitation of Birgitt Nilsson unable to control her volume is something I will not soon forget. Wish I had it on tape. And he can be delightfully—and appropriately—vulgar: "Why do men write poetry? Didn't you see *The Dead Poets Society*? 'To get laid!'" (This actually helps a student significantly in Mahler's "Serenade.") And "don't stand so close to the piano. When I do, I feel like I have this huge ass."

According to Hampson, two of the most stupid things ever said about singing are 1) Sing from the diaphragm, and 2) Project. "Voices don't project; they resonate." This reminds me of an old pro of mine who had a list of the Top Ten Dumbest Things Ever Said About The Golf Swing. The dumbest? "Keep your head down."

But then I am off on my ten hours . . .

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The media

Bad faith, common currency

by James Bowman

They're b-a-a-a-c-k! Those horrible weapons of mass destruction may not be much use at destroying people, but there's still hope for them, in some quarters, as a useful means to the destruction of George W. Bush's presidency. After a brief lay-off late last year and during the early part of this, in which the media tried out with greater or less enthusiasm other anti-Bush stories, such as the budget deficit, the criticisms of his former treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill —by the way, a prize of five shares of Alcoa stock, no questions asked, to anyone who can explain to me the meaning of the most famous of these, that the President was "like a blind man in a roomful of deaf people" —the alleged arrogance, partisanship, or duplicity of the State of the Union address, and even a patently absurd allegation that he had gone AWOL during his National Guard service, the media returned in February to its constant theme of last summer and autumn, those famously absent Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. You've got to conclude that, as the media sees things, this was the most promising line of attack.

For, as it was becoming increasingly clear, a line of attack was what the media wanted. Even the pretense of objectivity was scarcely bothered with anymore. No sooner had the administration given in to pressure and appointed a panel to investigate the pre-war intelligence about WMD than the outcry became that the President had already politicized the (bi-partisan) commission by instructing it to report only after he runs for re-election in November. "Bush had resisted such a commission until pressure intensified from members of both parties. He called for a report and recommendations by March 31, 2005, which is four months after he faces voters in the general election and two months after he leaves office if not reelected," as Mike Allen wrote in *The Washington Post* news story, darkly yet hopefully. Allen's article on Bush's naming of the commission is subheaded: "President Concedes Analysis May Have Been Flawed"—just another small contribution by the *Post* to the journalistic pretense on which all the criticism of Bush was founded, namely that intelligence is ever anything but flawed.

Bush's agreement to investigate the intelligence services was almost coincidental with the report of Lord Hutton, who had been appointed by Tony Blair, the British prime minister, to investigate the death of Dr. David Kelly (see "The Wages of Spin" in *The New Criterion*, October 2003) and who astonished expectation by severely criticizing the BBC and exonerating the government. In particular, the BBC was censured for the exaggerated and distorted reporting of one of its journalists, Mr. Andrew Gilligan, who had notoriously claimed last May that Mr. Blair had "sexed up" the intelligence data in order to justify the war in Iraq and, indeed, had "probably" known that some of that data was false when he so used it. Mr. Gilligan's source for this out-

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rageous claim was Dr. Kelly, who claimed that his words had been distorted and then killed himself. Lord Hutton had been appointed to investigate his death because of the mighty outcry which ensued blaming the government, and especially Mr. Blair's defense minister, Geoff Hoon, and his political adviser, Alastair Campbell, for conspiring to leak Dr. Kelly's name to the media, so causing the shame which in turn caused him to commit suicide.

The press and the opposition to Blair, both official and unofficial, had been licking their lips with anticipation about the report from a man they regarded as both intelligent and irreproachable as a judge, and they were obviously bitterly disappointed that he had let even Messrs. Hoon and Campbell off the hook and laid the blame entirely on the BBC for Mr. Gilligan's sloppy reporting, which had then been stoutly and wrongly defended by all of Gilligan's superiors, up to and including the BBC's director-general, Greg Dyke, and the chairman of its Board of Governors, Gavyn Davies. Both Messrs. Dyke and Davies were longtime supporters of Mr. Blair who, it was speculated, were keen to show their independence from him. Lord Hutton specifically called attention to the fact that his remit did not include passing judgment one way or the other on the quality of British intelligence about the still-missing weapons. That, together with President Bush's almost simultaneous agreement to appoint a commission of inquiry into the pre-war intelligence, forced the prime minister, almost as soon as he had been cleared in the matter of Dr. Kelly, to appoint one too, this one under Lord Butler.

To an American looking on, the most remarkable thing about the events in Britain was that Davies, Dyke, and Gilligan all promptly—or at least fairly promptly—resigned their positions at the BBC. "There is an honourable tradition in British public life," said Mr. Davies, who was the first of them to go, "that those charged with authority at the top of an organisation should accept responsibility for what happens in that organisation." And then: "I have been brought up to believe that you cannot choose your own referee and that the referee's decision is final." To be sure, it was a moment of graciousness that was swiftly undone as Davies joined Dyke and Gilligan in striking the "We wuz robbed" note, protesting against the injustice of their fate. But from this side of the Atlantic that which makes one rub one's eyes in disbelief is the idea that the media—the media, for God's sake!—might be subject to the judgments of a referee in the first place.

Here, of course, the idea that journalists might be answerable to any higher authority would instantly be denounced as an interference with "freedom of the press," the principle under which our media are able to guard their privileges as both judges and prosecutors—and their own Lord Hutton too if anyone should ever bother to complain. The only lapse or *bêtise* with the power to embarrass an American media boss comes with the disovery that some prankster has been making up stories. And even then the embarrassment usually only results in elaborate and insincere *mea culpa*s and resignations, if any, that are confined to middle management. Yet there is no shame in being fooled, once, through trusting someone who should be worthy of trust but isn't. The crocodile tears shed by *The New York Times* over the Jayson Blair affair last year struck me as having to do with the paper's overweening sense of its own importance. Certainly you will look in vain for any sense of contrition over the things it should be ashamed of, namely in concealing its biases or, as in the Gilligan case, defending the indefensible for political reasons.

In Britain too, there is furious resentment among the media at the very idea that the press should be subject to a higher tribunal. It was only the anomalous position of the BBC as a public corporation chartered by the government and financed by a government-mandated levy on the owners of television sets which allowed it to come under Lord Hutton's purview. Lately the Corporation

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has shown too little interest in preserving its uniqueness, both with regard to programming, which is now all but indistinguishable from that of the commercial networks, and with regard to an unmistakable slant to its reporting of the news, though it has learned the American networks' trick of denial, insisting that its unrelenting hostility to certain government policies, especially support for the American invasion of Iraq, is merely a symptom of its reporters' "independence." At the same time, it is happy to take advantage of that uniqueness as the reason why it should be regarded as more reliable than other media—or, for that matter, the elected government. As the *Daily Telegraph* editorialized:

> It is one thing for a tabloid or a Sunday newspaper to indulge in such cavalier behaviour; indeed, it is the very stuff of their trade. But the BBC is not meant to broadcast dubious stories. Precisely because of its unique status, the mere fact of it reporting such an item lends credence where none is due. Rather, the BBC should have a more respectable, trustworthy, public service ethos. This is not a matter of opinion, but of law.

Not that it mattered to those who joined in the journalistic outcry that greeted Lord Hutton's verdict. Left, right, and center were virtually unanimous in their disappointment with what Simon Jenkins in *The Times* called "the victory of a paranoid court over media criticism." With only here and there a few dissenting voices, the journalists employed by the privately owned media leaped to the defense of their colleagues (as they saw them) in the public sector, swiftly proclaiming that the Hutton inquiry—which virtually to a man they had been trumpeting as a model of fairness and objectivity right up until the moment of its report—was a "whitewash." Public opinion polls were published purporting to show that 56 percent of the British public thought so too.

Now that kind of poll-taking is utterly useless, as I have argued in these pages before (see "Reporting Innuendo" in *The New Criterion* of March 2002). Any time you ask someone if he thinks there is hidden corruption, wrong-doing, or cover-ups in public life, the chances go way up that he will answer in the affirmative if he knows nothing about the matter—because he thinks he'll look stupid or naïve if he doesn't. Everybody knows that politicians are corrupt, self-serving, and not to be trusted. The self-interest and corruption of journalists is much less obvious, and there is no question that their power and influence is much enhanced if they are not subject to any Hutton-like higher authority for the accuracy, logic, or good sense of what they say or write. Yet in all the media's criticisms of Lord Hutton there was an underlying sense that it was not quite fair to subject a journalist's report to the rigorous forensic scrutiny that a high-court judge could give it. It was not quite playing the game that the media's "free speech" has been reduced to, and a chilling effect might be expected if ever it became customary to look as closely into the things the media say and do as the media expect to look into the things governments say and do.

Gavyn Davies, determined not to be gracious in resignation, could not forbear publicly to ignore the peculiar circumstance which had brought him under official scrutiny and to wrap himself in the cloak of journalistic privilege, asking about Lord Hutton: "Are his conclusions on restricting the use of unverifiable sources in British journalism based on sound law and, if applied, would they constitute a threat to the freedom of the press?" Likewise, Greg Dyke apologized for Gilligan's mistake, but he continued to stand up for the gravamen of his report: "Provided his allegations were reported accurately, the public in a modern democracy had a right to be made aware of them. The greater part of the BBC's coverage of the dossier fulfilled this purpose." Richard Sambrook, the news director who was the only one of the principals in the Kelly affair not to resign, said that "there were

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things I wish I'd done differently," but that he would not apologize for "supporting a member of staff who was coming under pressure from Downing Street and I have absolutely no regrets about standing up for BBC news as a whole."

It would be cynical of me to detect a note of disingenuousness in this proud assertion of journalistic independence from government "pressure," but the tone of the BBC's coverage of the war in Iraq and its aftermath makes it difficult to imagine that if Tony Blair had taken the line on the war of his fellow European leaders, Messrs. Chirac and Schroeder, there would have been any need for demonstrations of such independence. Similarly, on the right the disappointment with Lord Hutton was pretty obviously to do with resentment over Blair's notching up yet another political victory when defeat had seemed to be so tantalizingly close. "So there he goes again," wrote Boris Johnson, the Conservative MP and editor of *The Spectator*. "The cordite is carried off by the breeze. The dust settles and out of the crater creeps the Prime Minister, beaming his chipmunk grin. He acknowledges the cheers of his back benches, flicks an invisible speck from his irreproachable Paul Smith sleeve and saunters off back to Downing Street. It is just flipping unbelievable. He is a mixture of Harry Houdini and a greased piglet. He is barely human in his elusiveness. Nailing Blair is like trying to pin jelly to a wall."

Rather endearingly, Mr. Johnson doesn't even attempt to disguise his exasperation, or to pretend that it has nothing to do with his accusation of a whitewash. "Hutton has succumbed to blindness of Nelsonian proportions. As snow-jobs go, this beats the Himalayas." The matter of truth, being unknowable, was just nowhere in most of the discussion of the Hutton report in the British media. Hutton had proclaimed himself to be on the side of the Blairites, so that those who were anti-Blairites, whether in general or over the matter of the war, were automatically against him too. Right and left were united in insisting that in essence Gilligan's report had been accurate and that he had just pushed it a little too far when he claimed on the basis of what turned out to be no evidence at all that the prime minister had deliberately set out to deceive. Likewise, in resigning, Gavyn Davies had made reference to the "intemperate attack" on the Corporation by Alastair Campbell. That would be the same Alastair Campbell whom his reporter had accused of lying so as to take the country into war. What was the big deal?, Mr. Davies appeared to be saying. Why be "intemperate" in one's response to such a trivial charge—or at least a charge so routinely made by journalists?

Of those commentators whom I read, only Janet Daley, also writing in the *Telegraph*, seemed to understand that the BBC had simply failed to grasp the seriousness of its own accusation against the government.

> This is an imputation of such enormity that anyone making it in the public arena—let alone the most prestigious news-gathering organisation in the world—should have done so only after the most rigorous process of verification. Gilligan's various (and varying) performances on the *Today* programme of May 29 are susceptible to easy criticism. They were sloppy, glib and inconsistent with his own (ineptly kept) records.
>
> But loose language from an over-enthusiastic reporter is not such an extraordinary or unforgivable thing in itself. The exigencies of live broadcasting being what they are, these things do happen—usually without tragic consequences. . . .
>
> No, it was not simply that Gilligan excitedly relayed his snippets of hearsay and office gossip without bothering to stand them up. It was what happened next that raised the real questions about the BBC's conduct.
>
> In response to a furious complaint from Downing Street (in the person of Alastair Campbell, whom the corporation saw as its nemesis), the entire managerial and governing apparatus of the BBC went to war with the Government. This declaration of open hos-

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> tility was made proudly and brazenly at the highest levels of the corporation. . . .
>
> There was a truly breathtaking arrogance, not to say amateurishness, about the way that the BBC refused to relent—or even properly examine—an accusation of such massive contentiousness.

The idea of journalists being "at war" with the government is something that we have ceased to regard as remarkable, as are accusations of mendacity. In war, after all, both lies and accusations of lying are all part of the contest. As Jeremy Paxman, the BBC's most feared interviewer once put it, in any interview he is constantly asking himself: "Why is this lying bastard lying to me?" Not surprisingly, therefore, the one bit of truth he will never be able to ferret out is that some people, sometimes, are *not* lying. That such a thing might be possible was what produced the Hutton inquiry in the first place—and Mr. Davies's initial deference to the "referee." The way he put this was interesting to me, too. That formulation, "I have been brought up to believe" is often used by those who feel obscurely that they ought to adhere to some old-fashioned form of honor—and which form of honor is *not* old-fashioned?—without quite knowing why. That he was then prepared to criticize Lord Hutton for arriving at the conclusion that he did showed that he could hardly have understood what he was doing in resigning, only that it was expected of him.

Well, it's a start, like Lord Hutton's quaintly anachronistic finding that Mr. Blair had been guilty of no "dishonourable, duplicitous or underhand" behavior. Those who say they have "been brought up to believe" something are also shifting the onus of belief back onto a previous generation and hence apologizing for continuing to believe themselves. Yet that is itself a form of belief, an unwillingness to cut all one's ties with the culture of civility that otherwise seems so irrelevant to one's work as a journalist. It is finally, dare one say it, a manifestation of a kind of pride—perhaps even a perverse pride, perhaps even snobbery—in continuing to belong to the club, as it were, of those who have had such an upbringing. It's not much, but perhaps it's enough to give us hope that there still might be a way, if we only knew how to find it, to put an end to the poisonous political "war" culture, in America as in Britain, in which accusations of bad faith have become the common currency.

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Books

Norman Podhoretz & the nature of things

by William McGurn

"We had an intellectually coherent thing. The American people knew what the rules were and then we did whatever." The year was 1993, and a newly installed William Jefferson Clinton was unburdening himself to *The Washington Post* about the difficulties of fashioning a coherent foreign policy in a post-Berlin Wall world. Clinton joked that he "missed the Cold War" because of the easy distinction between good and evil that had made things easier for his predecessors.

The Norman Podhoretz Reader,[1] a generous selection of writings from the distinguished critic and editor of *Commentary* from 1960 to 1995, reminds us that the distinctions so wistfully longed for by Mr. Clinton were in their own day not made as easily as he remembers. Nor did it start with Vietnam. Podhoretz recounts the happiness Mary McCarthy said she felt when "she suddenly realized one day that she cared about the outcome of the war, that she wanted the United States to win"—the point surely being that there were those who never did come around to that realization. Picking up on this note, Podhoretz cites a symposium in *Partisan Review* a few years later called "Our Country and Our Culture," whose most radical aspect was the reference to America as "our" country.

In some senses this is the undercurrent that runs through the entire *Reader*: That the fundamental distinctions that ought to have been easy (and which *were* easy to ordinary Americans) nonetheless eluded many members of the class whose lives were spent thinking about them. Though Podhoretz does not address Bill Clinton's self-serving nostalgia for the Cold War, as one who served on the front lines he would surely see in Mr. Clinton confirmation of all his misgivings: How a leader who took such self-conscious inspiration from having been asked to bear any burden would ultimately end up persuading himself that no burden in history had ever been quite so large as his.

"One of the longest journeys in the world is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan." With this line Podhoretz begins *Making It* (1967), the first of a trilogy of works chronicling his ascent to, dissent with, and life apart from the New York intellectual community. The piece is included here, along with segments from *Breaking Ranks* (1979) and *Ex-Friends* (1999). Yet though these works are all filtered through an overtly first-person prism, none are, at least in the ordinary sense, memoirs or autobiographies. Something similar can be said of all of Podhoretz's essays, which tend to feature their author without shading into autobiography.

Which makes definition something of a

1 *The Norman Podhoretz Reader: A Selection of His Writings from the 1950s Through the 1990s*, by Norman Podhoretz, edited by Thomas L. Jeffers; The Free Press, 478 pages, $35.

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challenge. In a brief introduction to the *Reader*, the British historian Paul Johnson sets Podhoretz against the backdrop of the postwar New York intellectual, hailing him as "both the archetype and sui generis." The archetype: Brooklyn-born, Jewish, educated in New York public schools in their heyday, following on to Columbia College, with aspirations to literary criticism and a career that was spent writing for small but influential magazines.

But Podhoretz was original for reasons both intellectual and personal. In terms of profession, as Johnson notes, unlike contemporaries who were more easily pigeonholed by profession—Lionel Trilling (professor); Mary McCarthy or Norman Mailer (novelist); Allen Ginsberg (poet); Daniel Patrick Moynihan (professor turned politician); Jacques Barzun (historian), etc.—Podhoretz is a polymath, a writing editor whose pen has engaged everything from the fate of the novel to the Old Testament Prophets. Yet with regard to his work, what set Podhoretz apart relatively early on was not just his catholic interests but also a style that he has elsewhere described as "auto case-history." It is not a felicitous wording, and he has yet to find anything better, but it gets to his insistence on measuring abstract ideas against the yardstick of personal experience.

This dichotomy between comfortable liberal abstractions and lived realities appears early on. In "My Negro Problem—And Ours," an early essay that gained him some notoriety, he gets right into it by noting the dichotomy between the world presented to him in print and film and the world he knew from Brownsville:

> [F]or a long time I was puzzled to think that Jews were supposed to be rich when the only Jews I knew were poor, and that Negroes were supposed to be persecuted when it was the Negroes who were doing the only persecuting I knew about—and doing it, moreover, to *me*.

As he goes on to explain, in the world in which he grew up it "was the whites, the Italians and Jews, who feared the Negroes, not the other way around." Never mind that the proscription he offered at the end—intermarriage—was, as he soon admitted, no solution at all. The defining characteristic of this essay was an unwillingness to look the other way at uncomfortable facts, even about himself. It also helps explain why, when his ideas changed, so did his friends.

Johnson tweaks him gently here, attributing the tumult created by these splits an American (and continental) intellectual environment that "plays for keeps." He contrasts this with the arrangement that prevails in his native Britain, where, he says, his own noisy departure from the Labor Party in the 1970s "did not sever a single old friendship." Sir Isaiah Berlin makes a related point when Podhoretz asks how he squared his Zionism with his continued appearance in a publication (*The New York Review of Books*) that regularly published enemies of Israel such as Noam Chomsky and I. F. Stone. Berlin's responded with a witticism. "I see," he responded. "You are accusing me of being a fellow-traveler of a fellow-traveler."

No doubt some of this has to do with Cardinal Newman's definition of Toryism as loyalty to persons over ideology, a disposition that surely has its pluses for civilized discourse. Yet it invites the question whether even a virtue may at some point become a vice. In Sir Isaiah's case, it is to suggest that this point may have been reached when, after Guy Burgess had revealed himself to be a Soviet agent, Berlin nonetheless pressed a journalist who would be visiting Moscow to convey "his warmest love" to Burgess and assure him that his former acquaintances back in England were shunning another intellectual whose crime really did put him behind the pale: a tabloid exposé of Burgess's libertinism.

It may be intellectual conceit itself to profess to detect in this *Reader* any kind of consistency in essays that span a half century and range on topics from Saul Bellow and

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Simone de Beauvoir to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the resurrection of faith in an age of science. That many were written at times when Podhoretz's social, political, and cultural sympathies were strongly at odds with what they are today adds a further complication. And yet I find three strong threads. The first is a concern for what we mean by America. The second is what we mean (or, equally often, what others mean) by being a Jew. And the third is what human nature has to tell us about both these things.

The first has its origins in the alienation with American life in that defined literary orthodoxy in Podhoretz's formative years, from Ezra Pound on the right to Edmund Wilson on the left. A half-century later the interest culminated in a book celebrating his "love affair" with America. Likewise the concern for all things Jewish accounts not only for his spirited defense of the state of Israel but also a study of the Prophets.

Overall, though, it is the obsession with the nature of things that runs through this *Reader* like a golden thread. While acknowledging, for example, the brilliance of Hannah Arendt's argument for Nazi ordinariness in *Eichman in Jerusalem*, he writes that it "violates the Nature of Man, and therefore the Nature of Totalitarianism must go hang." On the very next page he again locates the seeds of ideological confusions in competing views of "human nature," with totalitarianism substituting "for the naïve liberal idea of the infinite perfectibility of man the equally naïve idea of the infinite malleability of man." In the selection from *Breaking Ranks*, he advises his son that "there can be no more radical refusal of self-acceptance than the repudiation of one's own biological nature," and declares that it is "this identification of sterility with vitality [that] links the new narcissism of the Me Decade to Women's Lib and the gay-rights movement, and it was links of them to the radicalism of the sixties."

In the very last essay, on the failure of science to abolish religion, he suggests again that there exists a nature whose fullness cannot be captured by the microscope. He even quotes F. R. Leavis—his great mentor at Cambridge—as saying this held true for art as well, citing "loyalty to the dictates of [the work's] own nature" as the precondition for a great work of art. Professor Thomas J. Jeffers, who has helped assemble the *Reader*, includes an introduction to each section, which is marked by decades. In the lead-in to the 1970s, Jeffers cites Podhoretz's overriding belief that "there exists an unchanging nature of things to which we are best off submitting" and that most of the misery of the last fifty years has been the rebellion of our thinking classes from it.

Podhoretz is disinclined to indulge in the cheap despair of those who see globalization as "a metastasizing plague." When his grandson in Israel proudly informs him of the arrival of a (non-kosher) McDonald's in the Promised Land, Podhoretz suggests that what McDonald's really symbolizes is the "universality of human nature." And it is not just human nature that absorbs him. It is impossible to appreciate Podhoretz's treatment of either the Mideast conflict or the Cold War without comprehending, as he insists in his essay on Kissinger, that the fatal flaw of ignoring ideology is that "in any negotiation between a party with limited aims and a party with unlimited aims, the party with limited aims is bound to lose in the very nature of things." Which is why the détente that was sold on the basis of restraining the Soviet Union ended up restraining only Washington instead of Moscow.

No doubt it was this Brownsville rootedness that accounts for the lack of attraction Communism held for him even at his most green and idealistic. In his own description, having started out a Cold War liberal along the lines of Lionel Trilling, he soon moved sharply to Trilling's left and ultimately ended up on Trilling's right. That flirtation with the New Left is alluded to here and there with profound regret, and there is nothing that leads me not to believe him.

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But from the earliest there is a whiff of the apostate in Podhoretz's early liberalism, whether it be his suspicion of the dangerous primitivism celebrated by the Beats, his concerns with black criminality, or his insistence that the novel had to deal with reality as it was and not as novelists would have it.

From this remove, Podhoretz's embrace of the New Left at the stage in his life when he assumed the editorship of *Commentary* strikes me more as the holding of the conventional wisdom of the crowd in which he ran, rather like someone who has grown up in a church and learned his catechism without ever really subjecting it to hard questioning. No doubt there are things that he wrote that would mortify him today, but his real regrets appear to have more to do with his role in publishing and promoting writers such as Paul Goodman, Norman O. Brown, and James Baldwin. In terms of his thinking, however, even in his most leftist phases he does not come across as a true believer. And the disgust he feels for the debilitating effects of the counterculture seem more pronounced when the subject is literature than politics.

Many of the same complications hold true for neoconservatism, a movement in which he enjoys Founding Father status but which has never been sufficiently defined in positive terms. Negative definitions abound, from those on the right who see it as a Trojan Horse for liberalism to those on the left who see it as a conservatism with a friendlier face (not to mention those who use it as a crude euphemism for "Jewish"). Positive definitions have been more difficult to supply, and not only because neoconservatism is probably most frequently deployed as a pejorative. In its actual manifestations, it has not really been a creed along the lines of the cultural conservatism of the Russell Kirks, the libertarian consistency of a Hayek, or even the fusionism of a William F. Buckley, Jr. To my mind, the *Reader* confirms that neoconservatism is more a disposition that divided those on the left who adjusted their theories to reality from those who did vice versa.

Ultimately it proved a critical disposition for the future of America, because it manifested itself at a critical juncture in international relations. Probably neoconservatism didn't have much to do with Reagan's own beliefs—this was a man, after all, who read *National Review*, could quote Milton Friedman, and had given a speech for Goldwater back when Podhoretz was still shucking off his New Left credentials—but in its arguments neoconservatism did help Reagan soften the harder edges of Goldwaterism. To call it narrow because its interests and passions were so peculiarly New York is to miss the point. What the Podhoretz-led movement did was to open the war Reagan was fighting on a much broader front and in so doing lay claim to territory that had more or less been permanently conceded to the Left.

Those coming to Podhoretz for the first time—and even those more familiar with his later years—might be surprised to see how much of the *Reader* is devoted to literature. They are in for a pleasant surprise. But this is not such a discontinuity as might first appear. Early on Podhoretz had impressed on him that "radicals who seek as earnestly to transform themselves as to transform society have generally been hostile to literature." Which may be the key to understanding how the Columbia-educated son of a Brownsville milkman started out his career worried about the integrity of the modern novel and ended up realizing this was but one front in a much wider war.

Insolent humanism

James Knox Robert Byron. John Murray, 493 pages, £25

reviewed by Ben Downing

Nuremberg, September 1938: the week-long Parteitag, or Nazi Party Congress, is in full swing. At one session, in the very first row, sits Unity Mitford, indulging to the

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hilt her groupie's crush on Hitler. Beside her is an old friend, Robert Byron, unsure how to act. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, he throws out an arm in the Nazi salute, when suddenly Hitler himself stomps by. "My fingers," he will later recall, "were nearly bitten off by the Führer and I half withdrew my arm, thus assuming a position of grotesque flabbiness."

The incident is vintage Byron, most obviously in its humor—he was renowned for his raucous wit—but in more serious ways as well. He had wheedled an invitation to the event not out of ghoulish curiosity, still less admiration. To the contrary, he had already concluded, while many in Britain wavered over appeasement, that the Nazis were mad dogs, to be put down forthwith. (He half-joked about wanting "warmonger" stamped in his passport.) His purpose in visiting Nuremberg was to study German propaganda techniques, with a view toward improving English ones. Ultimately little came of it, and in 1941 Byron himself was sent to the bottom, his ship torpedoed by a U-boat. In a sense, though, the Parteitag trip represented the culminating deployment of a method he had spent years perfecting. To go and see for himself, to note intently, and finally to set before the world his impassioned opinions on a subject: this was Byron's procedure. It was precisely his love for civilization—not just deep but wide, taking in efflorescences of which even the learned were largely ignorant—that fueled his hatred of, and determination to resist, its goose-stepping opposite.

Born in 1905, Byron was a member of the so-called Brideshead Generation: that extraordinary cluster of people, marked by high literary talent and charisma (not to mention dipsomania), who burst onto the scene in the Twenties. Like many of them, he attended Eton, then Oxford, and was as incurably stricken as any with Wanderlust.

Not surprisingly, his first effort, *Europe in the Looking Glass* (1926), was a travel book in the light, cheeky mode popular at the time. But he swiftly became a far less frivolous traveller. Although only distantly related to Lord Byron—who also died just shy of thirty-six—he found that in Greece his name worked open-sesame wonders, and before long he too was a raving Grecophile. Not, however, where the Classical period was concerned. Violently allergic to received ideas, Byron scorned the temples and amphorae. By his lights, it was the Byzantines, still obscured beneath the opprobrium heaped on them by Gibbon, who had brought Greek genius to its apogee. This he first set about demonstrating in *The Station* (1928), which concerns Mount Athos. Braving ubiquitous bedbugs and ill-cooked octopus, Byron came away with a vivid account of monastic life on the Holy Mountain, hardly changed since medieval times. There followed two scholarly books, *The Byzantine Achievement* (1929) and *The Birth of Western Painting* (1930). In the latter, Byron rather quixotically attempted to dethrone Renaissance art in favor of Byzantine. Disappointed at its failure to shake up art-historical hierarchies, he brought his Greek phase to a close and shifted his focus further east. He was to spend much of the next few years roaming through Asia.

The initial results were *An Essay on India* (1931), an attack on ossified attitudes of the Raj, and *First Russia Then Tibet* (1933), a yoked pair of travelogues. Then, with the third book, he struck gold. To the extent that Byron is remembered today, it is almost exclusively for *The Road to Oxiana* (1937), which nearly everyone agrees to be not only his masterpiece but a classic of its genre. The book's eccentric charm begins with the improbability of its impetus: Byron went haring off across Iran on a single-minded quest to behold, not the marvels of Isfahan, but "a tapering cylinder of café-au-lait brick," as he describes the eleventh-century tomb tower Gumbad-i-Kabus. In so doing, he was, of course, once again exercising what Anthony Powell termed his "obsessive repugnance for cliché," and there is in the book a certain amount of sniping at Safavid magnificence, as earlier at Attic or Florentine. Yet the styles he now embraces, Seljuk

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and especially Timurid, are championed with a new, persuasive restraint. Indeed, the whole book represents a victory over his own worst habits. Its diary-entry format put a brake on his crankishness, polemicism, and tendency to swerve into purple patches. Christopher Sykes, who accompanied him for much of the journey, later claimed that Byron, for all his ornateness, revered H. W. Fowler and longed "to achieve a terse style." In *The Road to Oxiana*, we see his nearest approach to one.

Although I had glanced at *The Byzantine Achievement* and *The Birth of Western Painting* (both long out of print), until reading James Knox's biography my main sense of Byron was that he had been a travel writer's travel writer, a formative inspiration to heirs as different as Patrick Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin. Knox, while he confirms that impression—Chatwin, we learn, devoured Byron's books as a youth and placed him alongside Ruskin—also shows that there was much more to his career, which turns out to have been amazingly various. He produced reams of journalism, not all of it on aesthetic matters. (How refreshing to find him fulminating, in the American magazine *Mercury*, that Communism had caused in the Soviet Union "misery and destruction without parallel in recorded history"—this at a time when rosy-tinted views prevailed.) Perhaps more significantly, he was a prolific architectural critic and photographer, respected to the degree that in 1931 the *Architectural Review*, to which Byron was a frequent contributor, dedicated an entire issue to his article (with accompanying photos) on Sir Edwin Lutyens's triumph—and, as Byron saw it, Sir Herbert Baker's sour-grape perfidiousness—in building New Delhi. Under the spell of Geoffrey Scott, Byron even wrote a short theoretical treatise, *The Appreciation of Architecture*. And, like John Betjeman and James Lees-Milne, he played an important role in the Georgian Group, dedicated to the preservation of buildings from that period. One of my favorite quotes here is from a 1938 BBC debate on the subject, during which Byron asserted that the Georgian style

> corresponds, almost to the point of dinginess, with our national character. Its reserve and dislike of outward show, its reliance on the virtue and dignity of proportions only, and its rare bursts of exquisite detail, all express as no other style has even done that indifference to self-advertisement, that quiet assumption of our own worth, and that sudden vein of lyric affection, which have given us our own part in civilization.

What a fine formulation of essential Englishness! Clearly Byron, for all his wanderings in remote places and forgotten epochs, understood equally well his native soil.

The chief virtue of this biography, then, is that it patiently lays out, and astutely comments on, Byron's numerous endeavors; as a record of his intellectual life it is full and satisfying. But as a portrait of the man himself the book disappoints. Whereas his subject was reckless and often excessive, Knox, as if by way of compensation, is cautious, unexcitable, and, in his few forays into emotional terrain, perfunctory and shallow. What did if feel like to be Byron—and to be with him? What made him tick? It is the business of biographers to attempt, however tentatively, to answer such questions, and in so doing to conjure up a living image, however distorted. While one is certainly grateful that Knox did not foist on us, say, a psychoanalytic reading—given Byron's homosexuality and mother-worship, a Freudian would have a field day with him—one also laments the missed opportunity, especially when this is so far the only full-length biography of Byron to have appeared.

Knox's superficiality might be excusable if his subject had been a mere walking brain with no inner life to speak of. He was quite the opposite. "Impossible to convey to others what utter heaven he was," recalled Nancy Mitford. "So complex." Although notoriously belligerent—in his rudeness he

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could make Evelyn Waugh seem a lamb by comparison, and anyone venturing the wrong opinion in his presence would be drenched in irate spittle—he inspired fierce, undying affection in many of those who knew him. One reason was the excellence of his jokes. With his fleshy face, he bore an uncanny resemblance to Queen Victoria, and did hilarious imitations of her. (Leigh Fermor, who briefly knew Byron, described the performance to me thus: "He'd pull his chin back, puff out his cheeks, put a handkerchief over his head and, as a crown, a coffee cup on a folded napkin.") And he was surprisingly modest. Sykes, in his memoir—published in *Four Studies in Loyalty*, and still the first thing to read on Byron—remarked, "Robert's own opinion was that he figured in the world as a timid little fellow, an unnoticed and courtly nonentity. Referring to the colour of his eyes, he used to describe himself as a 'green mouse.' I can think of no one I have ever met whom I would so reluctantly include in the category of green mice, yet this was Robert's considered view of himself."

Again, it is a shame that Knox failed to pick up on, and then pursue, such clues to Byron's innermost nature. All the same, his well-written book is a welcome addition to the literature of Brideshead, and a thoughtful exposition of what Byron's mentor G. M. Young termed—a perfect epithet, this—his "insolent humanism."

Darwinizing politics

Paul H. Rubin Darwinian Politics: The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom. Rutgers University Press, 256 pages, $25

reviewed by Paul R. Gross

Suddenly, "Darwinian" design and interpretative techniques are not only permissible but also—in some privileged venues—fashionable. We see Darwinian applications in computer science, engineering, molecular biology, cosmology, psychology, psychiatry, political science, and economics. In his new book, *Darwinian Politics*, Emory University's Paul H. Rubin, Professor of Economics and Law, applies a Darwinian analysis to current political processes. The subtitle, *The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom*, is provocative but, in my view, justified.

Life on Earth is 3,500 million years old: an incomprehensibly long interval. We can assess it by analogy, but we cannot feel it as we can an hour, a year, or a human lifetime. Hominins—human-like apes—have been here for at least four and a half million years. Hominins of the genus Homo, which includes humanity and its cousins, are known from about two million years ago, the start of the Pleistocene Epoch. Two million years is no more comprehensible an interval for us than 3,500 million: it is just a very long time! Modern humans—we hunters and gatherers—arose about 250,000 years ago, probably in Africa, whence we began our outward migration some 140,000 years ago. Recent finds show us having adapted to and surviving even in the ice-age deep freeze, in coastal Siberia, 30,000 years ago.

The current epoch—the Holocene—began 10,000 years ago with the most recent onset of global warming and retreat of the glaciers, with the discovery of agriculture and the consequent building of settlements. There was thus a very long interval between the first appearance of our immediate ancestors and the technological discoveries that closed the books on the static eons of hunter-gatherer life. Social upheavals due to agriculture and hydraulics ushered in our restless existence in fiefdoms and cities, but through at least the 40,000 years preceding those developments, we—in essentially if not exactly our present physical and mental shape—lived on the land.

Conditions allowing civilization and a readable historical record began only in that geological eye-blink, the last 10,000 years. As Professor Rubin ably summarizes it, our ancestors lived for thousands of generations in a world radically unlike ours; during that residence, their bodies and brains evolved, as did the aggregate instincts, awarenesses,

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tastes, and behavioral tricks which are the product of those brains—the mind. In the new discipline of evolutionary psychology, the long period of human life *prior* to the Holocene is dubbed the "EEA"—the environment of (our) evolutionary adaptation. It deserves that name because in the course of its long development, the basic features of human cognitive performance—those instincts, tastes, and behaviors that are still with us—were "selected for" and stabilized. They became features of nearly all of the human population because their possessors were the most successful survivors and hence reproducers. The last 10,000 years are too short a period for this picture to have changed very much.

The idea of EEA is a key concept of evolutionary psychology and an indispensable background to Professor Rubin's arguments. Evolutionary psychology is sociobiology, still despised on the far left and the far right for bad but different political reasons. The left sees it as anti-social and deterministic; the right sees it as anti-religious, or as a nasty challenge to cherished tradition. *Darwinian Politics* is a well-documented but pleasingly readable epitome of interpretive insights from the application of evolutionary psychology to political behavior. It is an example of the consilience of which E. O. Wilson has written, for which he has heard so many indictments of his scientism, or worse.

With what might a "Darwinian" economics and politics deal? With matters such as these, each of which gets a chapter in the book: group membership and group conflict; altruism, cooperation, and sharing; envy; political power; religion and the regulation of behavior and how humans make political decisions. It deals, in short, with demonstrably heritable universals of human preference and behavior, and with the extent to which they fit—and sometimes emphatically do not fit—present social, cultural, and political reality.

For example: the facts of paleontology, archaeology, and anthropology tell us that for most of our time on Earth—until just now—we have been a small-group social species. *H. sapiens* has for most of its history lived in family or clan-sized groups: twenty-five to a hundred individuals. For a weak but clever animal, such groups have great advantages over solitary or near-solitary existence. Just as they do, in fact, for the other apes. An individual's tastes and behaviors conducive to successful small-group life enhanced survival and therefore reproduction. Many such variations made it into the next human generation: far fewer tastes of the opposite kind did. That's what evolution is and why it is inevitable.

Rather abruptly, in the Holocene, the world changed. Groups became much larger. In the EEA, humans had become adept at living successfully with fewer than a hundred others, where every member was known to every other member. With the growth of towns, immediate group size grew tenfold. It is now a thousand times and ten thousand times larger, and great cities even larger that that. Groups must, one way or another, be governed. Anarchy for a social species is the pipe-dream of Romantics or criminals. Clearly, the ways of governing and living with about fifty others cannot possibly suffice for governing and being involved with a million others, let alone hundreds of millions. The crucial difference is between social and political preferences for which we became specialized in the EEA, in which our cognitive styles and preferences remain to this day heavily invested—and the socio-political realities of the present. Solutions to many puzzles of human behavior are being sought and found in that difference.

Why, for example, do we—whole populations of us—become exercised to the point of political upheaval because of a story about, or a meeting with or a glimpse of, an individual, while we pay no attention to vastly more serious or urgent cases of similar kind that involve thousands whom we do not see? Why can one tear-jerker TV story create mass demand for senseless political action? Because we became experts in understanding, empathizing with, judg-

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ing individuals, people we see and know, and *not* in understanding statistics and abstractions. In the long period of evolutionary adaptation, personal insight was a key survival tool, and it was honed. Quantitation, analysis, and abstraction were not. This is one example of how our evolutionary history continues to affect behavior and emotions.

Our mammalian heritage and the pitiless imperatives that drive its survival and reproduction made it inevitable that in those small bands of the EEA there would be dominant males (since we *are* mammals, not dipterans or molluscs). Social organization would generate hierarchy, with dominants collecting and defending large harems. Males with heritable strong preferences in that direction would out-reproduce those with weaker preferences. Devices of control beyond mere combat would soon be needed, and such devices appeared and evolved: politics. We still have among us persons with especially well-developed preferences for domination, for acquisition, especially of mates, for cajoling or controlling subordinates. They are the most successful politicians. But now, the numbers they deal with are not fifty or a hundred, but thousands, millions.

Meanwhile, what of the non-dominants? Were *their* preferences static? Surely not. There emerged very early in the EEA variants of taste and preference for open—or disguised—subversion, opposition to, and, eventually, the counter-control or even elimination of dominants. Envy, that pernicious but politically indispensable human trait, evolved as one common variant. Just as domination made sense for the group as a whole (because of efficiency in hunting and defense against predators), so too did resistance to and subversion of dominants, preventing them from accumulating for themselves too many of the available goods (females, food). In a zero-sum world, which it was, only opposition to power insured that non-dominants would survive and perhaps mate. And that too was good for the group. The resistance movements are "reverse dominance hierarchies." A balance, in short, emerged in the small bands of our ancestors, descended from what had probably emerged much earlier among ancestral apes (and survives for us to observe in living troops of apes). It was a balance suited to small groups, between oligarchy and anarchy, servitude and freedom.

In the post-neolithic revolutions, however, that balance was lost. There is, surprisingly, no doubt that our forebears in prehistory had more personal freedom than did their descendants after the rise of cities and states. The devices available for domination and control (complex religions among them) increased and became extremely powerful. Devices for resistance to power failed to keep pace, and were eventually reduced to sporadic, mostly failed, revolutionary wars. Most of the wars that made real changes were between competing dominants.

The wonder is that we nevertheless discovered means by which we regained a measure of freedom for individuals (this time including women), and also—only very recently!—means for limiting in perpetuity the power of dominants. Those means are in liberal democracy—the only political system in which, so far, that has been accomplished. Because of its inherent instabilities, personal freedom in liberal democracy is always under threat from older, simpler political arrangements. Still, it is the most extraordinary achievement of our species so far. Thus envy and resistance to power, products of our evolution, are in one respect an inherited blessing, just as our easy diversion, by a good human interest story, from reason, justice, and even self-interest can be a grievous flaw. And yet envy itself, so useful for limiting dominance, is an inherited and dangerous flaw when it takes the form, in our largest groupings, of cultural resentment or class envy.

Summaries like this do not do justice to the richness of evolutionary psychology. Professor Rubin, however, has ably summarized the discipline's key insights, so that a nonspecialist reader can appreciate the real

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issues underlying the controversies. He has also cited a large body of primary literature, which will help readers to make independent judgments about the value of such Darwinian analysis. Needless to say, a new discipline like this throws up as many wrong notions as right ones. There is plenty of criticism within the discipline, even of the basics. Some critics challenge the assumed primacy of the EEA, arguing that rates of cognitive evolution, driven by language and culture just as much as by the physical environment, are much higher than is assumed in evolutionary psychology, and therefore arguing that human cognitive competences and styles have not been static during the last 10,000 years. Others accuse practitioners of evolutionary psychology of political or cultural naiveté. Of course there is the continuo, played so loudly that it cannot be missed, of purely political carping from both ends of the spectrum. This doesn't matter much. Fashionable or not, the evolutionary psychology of economic and political behavior is becoming a legitimate bridge between the social and natural sciences.

The quiet German?

Wolfgang Koeppen A Sad Affair, translated by Michael Hofmann. W. W. Norton, 176 pages, $23.95

reviewed by Tess Lewis

For all the pointed social criticism in his fiction, Wolfgang Koeppen's silences have spoken louder than his words. Silence is a freighted subject for any German who witnessed the rise and fall of the Third Reich without speaking out at the time, particularly so for an important German writer. Koeppen was certainly outspoken in the 1950s when his postwar trilogy—*Pigeons on the Grass* (1951), *The Hothouse* (1953), and *Death in Rome* (1954)—called his countrymen to task for a multitude of sins and weaknesses including their refusal to take responsibility for the rise of Nazism or to learn from their recent past, their rampant materialism, and their push toward rearmament. The critical reception of these novels ranged from grudging respect through indifference to outright hostility, surely contributing to Koeppen's inability to finish any of the several novels his publisher announced as forthcoming over the subsequent four decades. Koeppen filled that fictional void with travel writing, essays, newspaper articles, some short stories, and repeated interviews in which he carefully evaded any questions about his novels in progress. Yet most damaging of all was his silence about a book he had published anonymously in 1948, *Jakob Littner: Notes From a Hole in the Ground*.

This book, which Koeppen had been commissioned to ghostwrite, is a harrowing account of the experiences of Jakob Littner, a completely assimilated and highly respected Jewish stamp dealer who fled Munich in 1939 for the east. He barely survived increasingly precarious stays in several ghettos in Poland and then was hidden for almost a year in the cellar of an avaricious, impoverished Polish nobleman. Littner paid dearly for his hideout. At one point he even extracted the gold from his bridgework as payment.

On his return to Munich in 1946, Littner asked a publisher to find a writer to rework the manuscript of his memoirs. Koeppen, whose first two novels had met with only relative success before they were banned by the Nazis and who had no prospects of employment, signed on for a fee of two care packages a month. In 1947, Littner emigrated to the United States, where he died a few years later.

Koeppen adhered quite closely to Littner's manuscript, yet his improvements, primarily stylistic, were marked. Nonetheless, in 1948, few were ready for the sorts of truths the book told, however artfully. So it languished for forty-four years. In 1992, Koeppen's best work lay four decades behind him. He decided to republish the text, but this time as *Jakob Littner's Notes from a*

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Hole in the Ground: a Novel by Wolfgang Koeppen.

In his foreword to this second edition of Littner's story, Koeppen offers a carefully formulated disclaimer: "I was not one of those who knew nothing. Hell was all around. I was aware of my own helplessness. After all, who would go out and scream in the marketplace? In those years, death stalked each one of us." And he concludes ambiguously, "I ate American rations and wrote the story of the suffering of a German Jew. And so it became my story."

In 1993, Littner's relatives came forward with the original manuscript, threatening to sue for plagiarism. A paperback edition of Koeppen's version was published in 1994, without the words "a novel," but Koeppen remained as evasive on this subject as ever. He died in 1996 without ever having made a public pronouncement about Littner's story 'becoming' his own. The gifted translator, Michael Hofmann, has been waging an enthusiastic campaign in English-speaking lands to get Koeppen the recognition he deserves for the stories that truly were his own. Hofmann has translated *The Hothouse*, *Death in Rome*, and Koeppen's first novel, *A Sad Affair*. This was no easy task given the dense, lyrical rush of Koeppen's prose or his vast range of allusions from classical Greek and Roman literatures, Wagnerian opera, French Symbolism, to advertisements and song lyrics from the beer halls. Hofmann's translations seem as true to the spirit and sensuousness of the original as it is possible to be.

Wolfgang Koeppen, born in 1906, was not one of the "inner émigrés" who couched their decision to stay and write in the Third Reich as a subversive defense of the other, "true" Germany. Instead, he spent most of the war years writing purposefully innocuous and impractical filmscripts, before using the bombing of his Munich apartment in 1944 as an opportunity to 'disappear' underground until the war's end. In 1931, Koeppen had moved to Berlin to be a journalist, and there he wrote his first two novels, *A Sad Affair* (1934) and *The Tottering Wall* (1935). In the mid-Thirties, he moved to Holland after the newspaper he wrote for folded and he stayed there until his visa ran out in 1939. Even the Nazis' ban on his books in 1936 because of their decadent themes and their Jewish publisher did not dissuade him from returning home.

Koeppen's first publisher, Ernst Cassirer, had noticed his articles and commissioned a novel. When Koeppen repeatedly failed to deliver the promised manuscript, Hofmann writes in his engaging introduction, Cassirer locked the writer up with a typewriter and a stack of paper. Koeppen delivered *A Sad Affair*. It is tempting to see traces of that confinement in this claustrophobic roman à clef of obsessive, unrequited love. Set in the prewar demi-monde of cabarets and procurers, the novel follows the student Friedrich's attempts—some earnest, some bathetic, others ridiculous, but all of them doomed—to capture the heart of the ravishing, promiscuous, and childlike actress Sibylle. She is serially unfaithful to the drama critic with whom she lives, sleeping with almost anyone she meets except for Friedrich and his equally smitten friend Beck. She keeps these two men on a string, and as a threesome they romp around Zürich playing jokes on the staid bourgeois, their hilarity barely concealing profound despair.

Like Friedrich, Koeppen had once been deeply and unhappily infatuated with the cabaret singer Sybille Schloss, and his novel's fictional veil appears thin indeed. In the novel, no amount of rejection or humiliation can persuade Friedrich that Sybille is not fated to be his. *A Sad Affair* is the intimate emotional diary of an otherwise rational man caught in the throes of an overwhelming passion. Koeppen charts Friedrich's elaborate emotional journey with delicacy and precision, from his euphoria at the slightest signs of hope, through studied indifference, abject suffering, despair, rage, and finally to his embrace of a fragile resignation that depends as much on his clearsightedness as it does on his illusions. "[T]he wall of glass was

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still between them, sheer as air and acutely reflecting the image of the other. It was a frontier that they now respected. Sibylle remained destined for him; Friedrich was the human being who belonged to her. Nothing had changed."

Koeppen's later books are also emotionally charged, but less introverted. They seethe with despair, disgust, and loathing only somewhat relieved by dark humor. In an interview he referred to his writing as an "attempt at a monologue against the world." In his 1950s novels, the monologue becomes a diatribe, and an eloquent one at that. Koeppen's satiric trilogy was not quite a scream in the marketplace, yet it was a decidedly provocative challenge to the German public.

Pigeons on the Grass is a montage of shifting scenes from the course of a single day in Munich in 1951. Under the recurrent threatening drone of Allied planes flying overhead, German civilians and American soldiers meet, their encounters pointing up the flaws of both sides. The Americans are shown as well-meaning but limited idealists whose fight for justice in the world does not mask the racial injustices at home. The Germans more damningly appear as opportunists, predators, or moral amnesiacs.

In Koeppen's central novel, Bonn is the stifling hothouse of the title. Keetenheuve, a poet who spent the war years in exile in Canada, has returned to Bonn as a member of the opposition party in the Bundestag. The idealism that brought him back to Germany is short-lived. Dispirited by the foreign powers' machinations to perpetuate the division of Germany and his own government's rush to rearm, he realizes that he is "crusading against power that was so entwined with all the old power, that it could afford to laugh at the knight who sallied out to challenge her, and sometimes, in a spirit almost of kindness to offer a target for his zeal, she tossed a windmill his way."

Some ministers attempt to gain his support for their plans with futile quid pro quos. Keetenheuve is also offered the bribe of an ambassadorship to Guatemala, where he would be safely out of the way. More subtly, Keetenheuve is pressured through an invitation to the government canteen, "a fearsome great barn of a place, reeking of rancid fat, stinking of burnt flour," where he can choose between several gray meat and gravy dishes "on a Bed of Mashed Potatoes." It is an inexpensive reminder to Keetenheuve of his nation's lowest common denominator and "the mean fate to which it was possible to be reduced." Keetenheuve cannot escape the conclusion that "people had naturally remained the same, it didn't even occur to them to change, merely because the form of government had changed, because the uniforms thronging the streets and making babies were now olive-green instead of brown, black, and field gray." His only way out is suicide.

Koeppen even ratchets up his criticism of Adenauer Germany several notches higher in the third novel, *Death in Rome*. It is a tour de force, part thriller, part commentary on Thomas Mann's masterpieces *Death in Venice* and *Doktor Faustus*. An estranged German family meets in Rome. The alpha-male, Gottlieb Judejahn, is a former SS general condemned at Nuremburg and now an arms merchant for an unnamed Arabian kingdom. His brother-in-law, Friedrich Wilhelm Pfaffrath, a political chameleon who has rehabilitated himself from his Nazi past, now serves as a mayor and desperately wants to have Judejahn rehabilitated as well. Pfaffrath's son Siegfried, an avant-garde composer, is in Rome for the premiere of his new symphony. Like Adrian Leverkühn, Siegfried has been searching for a new musical idiom, one that "might sound horrible to the generality which lagged behind the times; but it would carry a new message." He does not sign a pact with demonic forces, however, as he has already narrowly escaped them. Judejahn's son Adolf has joined the priesthood, but agonizes over the authenticity of his calling.

Their encounter is, predictably, disastrous. But in leading up, slowly, inexorably to the

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final catastrophe, Koeppen plays variations on a number of historically uncomfortable themes: the contaminating ties between Church and State, the coexistence of high culture and a cult of murder, the German longing for a romantically idealized Italy and their attempts to invade it.

If Koeppen's characterizations strike one as excessive, it is instructive to recall, as Douglas Porch and George Cornewall Lewis do in a recent article in *The National Interest*, that surveys taken in the mid-1950s showed a majority of Germans believed that "Germany's best time in recent history had been during the first years of the Nazis," and a significant minority felt "Nazism was a good idea badly carried out."

By the 1960s, Koeppen's writing finally began to gain widespread recognition. His portrayals of the Wirtschaftswunder's darker side and the hidden costs of his country's rise from defeat and utter devastation were no longer as threatening. In 1962, he was awarded the Büchner Prize, but such encouragement was not enough to overcome his difficulties in finishing various novels, the openings of which he published in journals before abandoning them.

In *I Laid Low, I Made Myself Small . . .*, a recent, untranslated biography of Koeppen, the German academic Jörg Döring takes as his title an answer Koeppen gave to an interviewer who asked what exactly he had done during the War. Döring's attempt to clarify Koeppen's evasiveness yields intriguing bits of information, such as evidence that Koeppen's stay in Holland from 1934 to 1938 had as much to do with political objections as with an increasingly dangerous affair with an SS officer's wife in Berlin. Koeppen is an intriguing literary figure, unable or unwilling to bring the same ruthless clarity to his life that so devastatingly illuminates his fiction.

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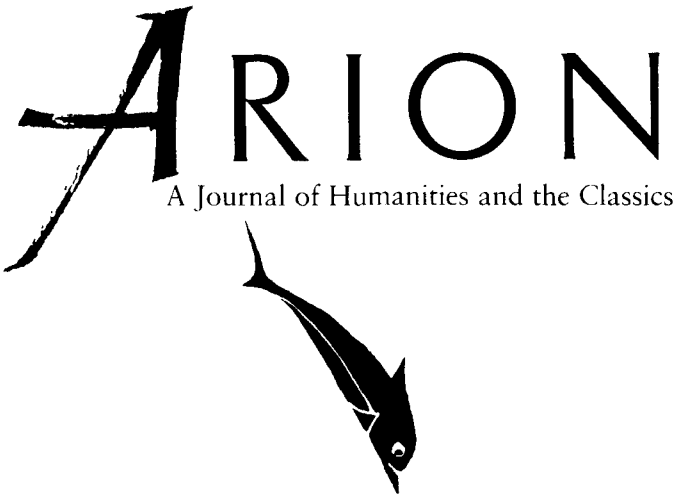

The grand sequence of the classical tradition, which extends in various strands through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the scientific Enlightenment and modern era, is actually a master paradigm for how to structure an authentically multicultural curriculum on a global scale. All students abroad as well as in the US need to learn the general contours of the world's major artistic and cultural traditions. These long channels of lineage can best be understood as streams—mighty rivers that are fed by tributaries and that are a confluence of mixed and varied material . . .

Camille Paglia, "The Mighty River of Classics"
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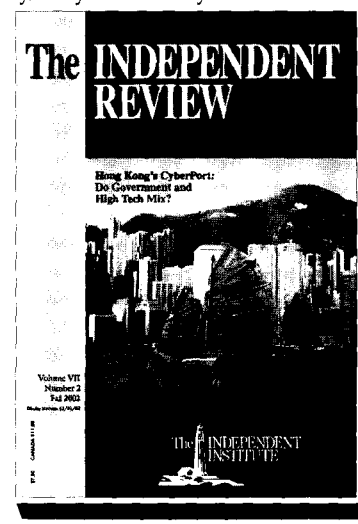
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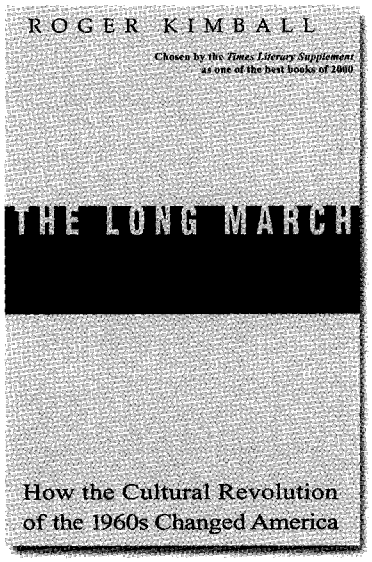
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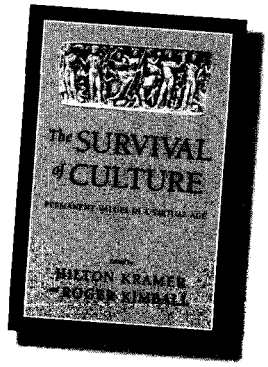
A critical fever chart of our age

HILTON KRAMER AND ROGER KIMBALL, EDITORS

The Survival of Culture

Permanent Values in a Virtual Age



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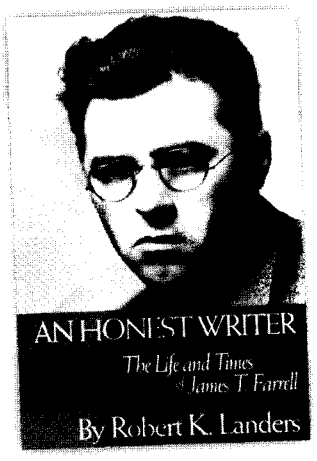

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James T. Farrell was one of the brightest stars in American literature during the 1930s. Studs Lonigan, his trilogy about a young Irish "tough" from Chicago's South Side, was acclaimed as a modern classic. But later, as the naturalism he employed in his best fiction slipped out of vogue, his star dimmed.

In *An Honest Writer*, Robert Landers restores this important writer to his rightful place in American literature. We see here the vibrant Chicago of Farrell's birth and boyhood, and the struggling Irish-Americans who defined the city. We also see Farrell's search for love, and sexual fulfillment, his relationships with friends and enemies such as Theodore Dreiser, Edmund Wilson and Nelson Algren, and his movement away from the radical Left of his youth and his brave stand against Stalinism.

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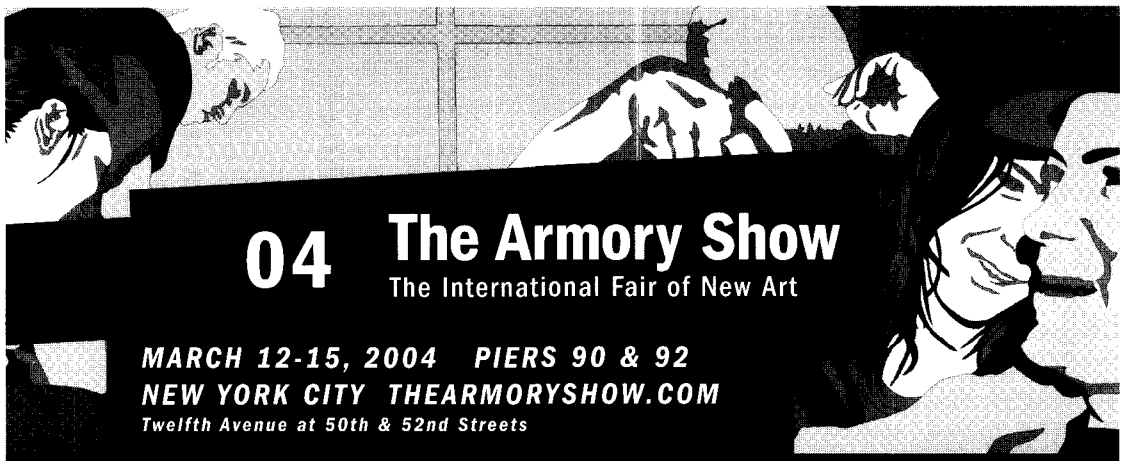

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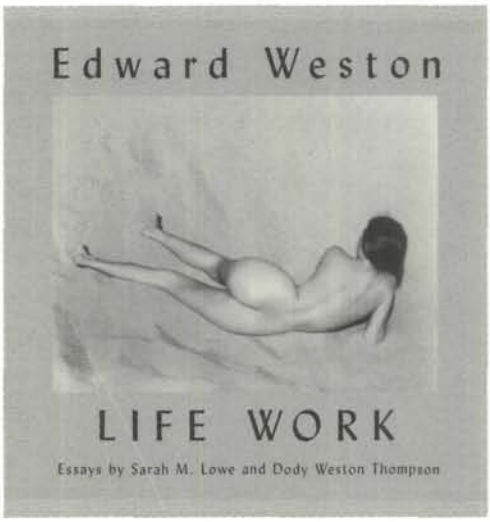

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A series of essays by Sarah M. Lowe illuminates each phase of Weston's *oeuvre*. A first-hand remembrance by Dody Weston Thompson, Weston's last assistant, gives the reader an in-depth look at Edward Weston the man, as well as insightful writing about his photographs.

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